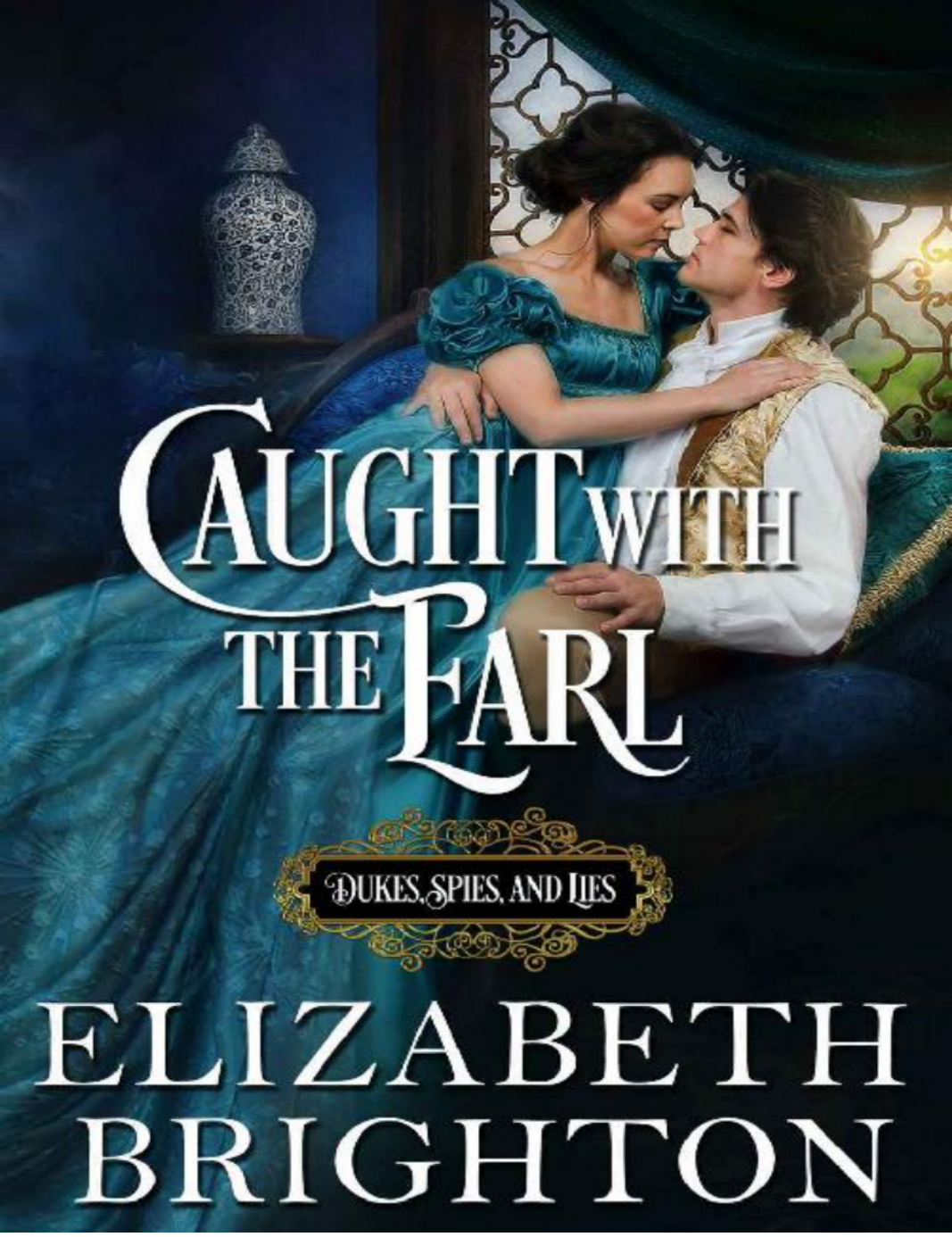

CAUGHT WITH THE EARL
DUKES, SPIES, AND LIES
ELIZABETH BRIGHTON

Caught with the Earl

Dukes, Spies, and Lies

Elizabeth Brighton

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Also by Elizabeth Brighton

Chapter 1

The snow fell faster, blanketing the earth in a thick white layer. The storm was earlier than expected, stronger than reported, and Eric had been late getting started.

Again.

But the pretty young viscountess had been so insistent, and he couldn't disappoint a lady.

Besides, it wasn't like he would be doing something else at the Prescott house party.

Sure, he was ostensibly attending the party in his search for a wife, but since the family of the young lady he wanted to marry had rejected his suit, he'd been dealing with rejection as he always did.

And he had lots of experience, both with rejection and with soothing the sting of it.

Just like your father.

His mother's words echoed in his head. Erik hadn't known what they meant the first time she'd flung them at him, but he did now.

And she hadn't been wrong.

His father had been a renowned rake.

Attractive. Charismatic. Skilled.

As the ninth Earl of Marquardt, Lord Erik Gautin took after his father in more than looks. But he was never supposed to have been the earl.

Erik stared out at the mounting snow that buried everything under a cold, wet blanket. He sympathized, but in his case, it was a blanket of his own making.

His mistakes, one on top of another.

He was a good-for-nothing, but he was a good-for-nothing that needed to marry and provide an heir. He'd eventually have to select a wife and produce the obligatory heir and spare. It wouldn't have been a chore if the family of the young lady he'd been half in love with for most of his life would've at least considered his suit.

Not that he blamed Lady Violet Pemberley's brother for rejecting him out of hand.

Erik knew what he was. What he'd allowed himself to become.

He'd been useful once, even needed, but that had ended along with the Great French War.

Everyone had returned home, and that was partly because of him, though they would never know that. Never know all he had done for king and country. And Erik was okay with it. They didn't need to know as long as they got home safely.

He thought of the men he'd served beside. All would need wives soon, though it was strange that Duke Erembour had already married.

Erik smiled.

Duke Erembour was the one he'd expected to marry last, yet he'd been the first. Sometimes even Lord Erik Gautin was wrong about things. But then Erik hadn't factored in Lady Aurora.

Erik's smile widened.

Marriage hadn't softened his former commanding officer. Quite the opposite. It had made him more intense, more focused, and more driven. Erik hadn't thought such a thing possible, but now Duke Erembour had something tangible to protect.

And it showed.

Not even an enraged tiger would tangle with the duke now.

Erik wondered if he would ever have someone like Lady Aurora to protect. Someone he would care about even half as much as Duke Erembour cared about his duchess.

Probably not.

While Erik had his choice of women to share his bed, that wasn't the same thing as what the duke and duchess had. Not even close. And Erik wanted what the duke and duchess had more than anything.

But the title and wealth that had passed to him upon his brother's death had made it harder to find. Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, suspected most of the ladies interested in being his wife were more interested in being a countess than him.

While that would give him an heir and a spare, it wasn't what he wanted. That's what his parents had, and it had made them both miserable. Erik wanted something else, something more, even though he had no idea how to get it.

The snow came down faster, and despite how many times Erik had been to visit the Prescott's, he was becoming disoriented in the heavy snow. The road itself was almost completely covered.

He cursed himself for not leaving sooner.

It would just be his luck to freeze to death on the side of the road because he'd tarried too long in a lady's bed.

And probably the death he deserved.

There was a small hunting lodge not far from where he was that he'd stayed at often as a boy. Erik had even spent the night in it a time or two with his older brother. Michael had been a skilled hunter, and

he'd enjoyed preparing for the hunt as much as partaking in it.

Erik had learned a lot about hunting from his brother, and he'd applied it to pursuits that didn't involve waking up with the chickens or traipsing through the cold.

And this was an even more unpleasant storm than the ones his brother had dragged him out in. Even with his multi-caped greatcoat, Hessians, and ermine-lined gloves, Erik felt the chill. The foot warmer had given out sometime back, through the heavy fur blanket still carried some of its heat.

There was little Erik could do to speed up the coach, so he settled back in his seat, tried to stay warm, and contemplated what he would do at the Prescott's.

While there would be several unhappy wives eager to see him at the house party, Erik needed to find a wife and sire the next Earl of Marquardt. Dallying would not help him find what the Duke and Duchess of Erembour shared.

But he doubted there would be any ladies there he hadn't already met. Repeatedly. And none of them compared to… He shook his head. Lady Violet Pemberley was beyond his reach. Her brother had seen to that. Best to accept it and move on.

Besides finding a wife, Erik had numerous other obligations he needed to oversee.

Would oversee.

He blew out a breath, and it puffed around him.

Michael had been trained to be the Earl of Marquardt since the cradle, while Erik had been the "spare". His parents had assumed he would take up an officer's commission or a place in the church, though they hadn't pushed him toward either.

Erik had chosen to serve king and country, at least until his brother had died. Then Erik had come home to be the Earl of Marquardt, and that's when everything had changed. When he had started making mistake after mistake, proving Lady Pemberley's brother correct.

Lord Erik Gautin focused on the white wonderland stretching out in all directions.

If he married the right girl, perhaps she would know more about running an earldom than he did.

Or maybe her family would.

Erik needed all the help he could get. He'd made a mess of so many things, but he wouldn't make a mess of the earldom. Too many people relied on his family for that.

While it was expansive, he doubted running the earldom would be any more difficult than all he had done for Duke Erembour. Different, but not harder.

Except for being alone out at Hartmore. While he loved the home he'd grown up in, it felt more like a mausoleum now. Both of his parents had passed away, and so had Michael. It wouldn't be so bad once he had a wife and family.

But first, Erik had to find a wife.

As he gazed out at the road ahead, a dark shape loomed in front of his carriage. Erik rapped on the roof, signaling the driver to slow.

The last thing they needed was to crash into a coach that was stuck in the middle of the road.

As his carriage slowed and eventually pulled alongside the other vehicle, Erik winced. The angle of the conveyance and the tilt of the wheels suggested a broken axle. Not only was there no way to fix it now, but it would take time to have one made, brought out, and properly installed.

The rest of the vehicle appeared sturdy and well-kept, so he had no idea what could have caused such a catastrophic failure. The roads here weren't like they were in London, but they were well kept.

A tingle at the nape of his neck warned him.

It was the kind of warning that had saved him more than once, both from the French and from jealous husbands.

As he was about to order his driver to continue on and they would send back help, he glimpsed a face in the carriage's window.

Lady Violet Pemberley.

Where were her brothers?

Erik cursed. He couldn't leave her out there to freeze.

He pulled his beaver hat down over his ears and turned up his collar against the cold. Pushing open his door, he shielded his face as he trudged through the snow to her carriage and rapped on the door.

She peered out at him, and her eyes widened in recognition. She then struggled with the door as the snow had already started to ice it closed.

Erik forced it open, then tucked his hands under his arms as he climbed into her coach beside her. It wasn't much warmer in the coach than it was outside of it, but at least the thick walls shielded them from the worst of the wind.

"Lady Pemberley." Erik dipped his head.

"Thank goodness you're here." Her words shook. Whether from cold, fear, or both, Erik wasn't certain.

Still, it was strange to have someone so happy to see him. "Looks like you've run into a bit of trouble. How can I help?"

"I don't know what happened, but there was this awful noise, then we lost control of the coach and skidded to a stop. My brother took one horse and went to get help, but that was some time ago. Joshua is outside with the other horses, but it seems like my brother has been

gone forever."

The tingling down Erik's spine intensified. "Snow's getting worse. Don't think it's safe for either of us to stay out in it much longer."

She bit her plump pink lip, but nodded.

They both understood the risk to her reputation of riding unchaperoned in his carriage with him, but the risk of freezing to death was also very real.

"We'll figure out how to get you to the Prescott's without anyone knowing I was with you once we get closer. Right now, we need to make it there."

Lady Violet touched his wrist, and even through the layers of fabric, sensation jolted him. She was so delicately made, like the finest porcelain, but Erik had learned the hard way she had a spine of steel.

"You would never take something a lady didn't offer."

True enough. Problem was, he always had more than enough offers.

Erik gave her his charming smile, nodded, then shoved the door. It pushed back, but he got it open and handed Lady Violet down from her carriage.

As he reached for the handle of his carriage, a gunshot split the afternoon, and the scent of fresh blood stained the frigid air.

The horses of both carriages bolted.

The ones from Lady Pemberley's had been unhitched, and they galloped down the road with the carriage driver clinging precariously to one of their backs. His carriage, however, was still attached to the beasts, and when they bolted, they took it with them.

The treacherous road conditions had the coach swaying precariously, but Erik ignored it.

He grabbed Lady Pemberley's hand and dove over the snowbank behind her carriage, dragging her down with him.

Several unladylike words fell from her as he tucked her against him to protect her from the worst of the fall and rolled down the embankment as a second shot fired.

Erik clapped a hand over her mouth, then waited a moment.

Ringing silence filled the snow-thick air, and Erik touched a finger to Lady Violet's lips, begging her to stay silent. He gripped her hand and pulled her to her feet, then positioned her in front of him so he was between her and the road. Erik hunkered down and listened.

He heard nothing other than the howl of the wind.

They didn't have much time. It would take an experienced rifleman less than three minutes to reload and take another shot.

Erik leaned close to Lady Violet. "We have to make it to the forest. Stay low."

She shivered, but nodded.

Thank God for that spine of steel.

Erik nudged her forward, and Lady Violet crouched low and sprinted for the forest. He followed behind her, protecting her as they ran. Despite her heavy skirts, she was fast, and they cleared the tree line as another shot pierced the stillness.

Lady Violet slapped a gloved hand over her mouth.

Taking her by the elbow, Erik led her deeper into the forest. He didn't have time to cover their tracks, but the wind and storm would do a decent job of that.

It was cold, so damned cold, and the wind tore through his great coat. Erik couldn't imagine how frozen Lady Violet had to be, but she said nothing as she ran beside him.

Her skirts grew heavy with snow, but still she ran.

They had to put distance between them and the man that had shot at them, but they also needed to find respite from the storm.

The snow swirled around him and Lady Violet as the cold bit into them. If they didn't find shelter soon, it wouldn't matter if the shooter found them again. The cold would kill them even if the shooter didn't. The only saving grace was that their attacker would also have to find shelter or perish, making it harder for him to pursue them.

And Erik knew where the hunting lodge was.

Lord Prescott would have it stocked with firewood, spirits, and assorted dried fruits and meats. Not as luxurious as what Lady Violet was accustomed to, but they would be warm and safe until the rescue teams found them.

If he could get them there.

Erik stared down at Lady Violet, shivering but silent beside him. She needed him. He would not let her down.

Keeping hold of her hand, Erik plunged them deeper into the storm and farther from the road.

Farther from the man who had shot at them.

The wind whipped through his greatcoat and stole his breath. Still, he pushed forward. They had to find shelter. Had to escape from the shooter and the cold. Both were deadly, and he wouldn't let either have Lady Violet.

The further they trudged through the cold and snow, the quieter the niggling fear. Erik wasn't certain if it was because the fear was being frozen out of him, or if they had lost the man who'd shot at them.

He gulped in a breath, and the cold burned his lungs. His legs ached from running through the knee-deep snow, and he struggled with each step even though he wore boots and trousers.

Violet leaned heavily on his arm and motioned for him to pause.

"We have to keep going," Erik said, the wind snatching his words.

Lady Violet nodded as she plodded along beside him. While she never complained, her steps grew slower and less certain, until only his hand was keeping her upright.

Erik wasn't certain how much farther the lodge was, but he would get her there. He may be a good-for-nothing, but he would not fail Lady Violet.

Sliding his arm underneath her, he supported her as they pushed on.

Night was falling, but they couldn't stop. They had to make it to the cabin before their attacker found them or the cold froze them.

Finally Violet tumbled forward and would have fallen into the snow if he hadn't caught her.

"Go on," she said. "Send back help."

"When Hell freezes over, milady."

"Given this storm, it might already have."

Erik said nothing as he lifted Lady Violet and tossed her over his shoulder. He was certain her snow-encrusted skirts weighed more than she did. She protested briefly, then settled against him.

Erik carried her through the rising drifts.

As he stumbled through the blizzard, Erik silently cursed himself. Where was the damnable lodge? He had traveled this way dozens of times before, but it hadn't been in a blizzard. He'd been able to feel his fingers and toes. And he'd been able to see more than a few feet in front of himself.

Erik gulped in another frozen breath as he stared at Lady Violet in his arms.

He would not give up. He would find the hunting lodge.

Trudging on through the snow, Erik glanced behind him. But the wind had already blown away all but the faintest trace of his steps. They would be gone by morning, making it impossible for the attacker to follow them.

Assuming the man needed to follow them, and the snow didn't do his job for him. Even with Lady Violet over his shoulder, Erik was cold.

Erik shook his head, tossing the thought aside.

If he'd learned anything during his time under Duke Erembour, it was that action followed thought.

He was going to get Lady Violet to safety. He would not fail her.

Erik had to focus on the next step. And the step after that.

Trust himself.

He had been to the lodge dozens of times with his brother and with James Prescott. He would get them there.

Had to get them there.

One step. Another.

Another.

His breath puffed around him, and Erik fell to his knees as his strength failed. He was half-tempted to lie there with Lady Violet underneath him. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant way to die.

But he couldn't let her die. She needed him, and he would be there for her.

Holding her slim form against him, Erik forced himself back to his feet and trudged onward.

Another step.

And another.

Focus on the end goal.

Action followed thought.

He'd been in his share of scrapes, some almost as bad as this, and he'd always pulled through. He may be a good-for-nothing now, but he hadn't been when king and country had needed him.

Now Lady Violet needed him.

After another few steps, he saw the outline of the hunting lodge.

Erik would've whooped for joy if he'd had the strength. Instead, he dragged himself and Lady Violet inside.

Chapter 2

It was warm. Too warm to be in the coach or frozen in the snow. Yet not warm enough to be where her mother kept warning Violet she'd go when she died.

Violet stretched and groaned.

Every inch of her ached.

She remembered the punishing run in snow up to her thighs. She'd tried to keep going, but she hadn't been able to.

Had her brother made it back in time?

Violet forced her eyes open and blinked, but she didn't recognize where she was. Still, there was a small fire in the hearth that warmed her. While she ached, she felt cozy under the thick furs. She lifted her arms above her head and quickly tucked them back under the furs.

She was completely naked. Propping herself up on her elbow, she noticed the pile of clothes that had been carefully laid out to dry.

Swallowing, she closed her eyes again and tucked the furs up to her chin. This was bad. Very, very bad.

She was alone with one of the most notorious rakes of the ton, and she didn't have on a stitch of clothing.

Had they… no, she was certain they hadn't. Lord Erik Gautin didn't have to force himself on sleeping ladies. He had a list longer than her arm of beautiful women that would willingly fall into bed with him.

Still, that's not what anyone would believe.

Or they would simply think her name was on the list, and she had given herself to him willingly.

While her reputation would be in tatters, at least she was alive. And maybe life in a convent wouldn't be so bad. At least she wouldn't have her three older brothers telling her what to do all the time.

Violet bit her lip.

She prayed Robert, her middle brother who had been riding in the coach with her, had made it to town. She couldn't bear the thought of him freezing to death, as she had almost frozen to death.

Would have frozen to death, if not for Lord Erik Gautin.

The thought sent a pleasant shiver through her.

He was handsome as sin, always smelled delightful, and he could play the part of a gentleman. She understood why he had so many willing paramours, and she had hoped to become one after she had settled for a proper society marriage and produced the heir and spare required.

It would never do to fall in love with a rake, after all. Even if she had been enamored with him since they'd been kids.

She had to be the dutiful daughter. The good sister. The proper lady.

Everything she was supposed to be, but wasn't.

"Are you awake?" Lord Erik whispered as he entered the room wearing nothing but furs.

Violet really wanted to stare. Really, really wanted to stare, but she kept her gaze focused on the fire. "Yes."

Lord Erik sat beside her and handed her a mug of warm tea.

She drank deeply, then grimaced. "There's more in that than tea."

He grinned. "It'll warm you up on the inside."

Violet stared down at the mug in her hands, then at the fire. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"I wouldn't thank me yet. Storm's picked up. Not sure when it'll abate, but we should be safe here."

"And warm. I wasn't sure I would ever be warm again." Violet took another sip of the tea that wasn't just tea.

She then lay back on the floor and listened to the wind howl. But the hunting lodge was sturdy and the fire warm. She felt safe and content, despite everything else. Probably because Lord Erik was with her. He had always protected her, as he had again.

"I was worried about you," Lord Erik admitted. "I'm glad you're okay."

So was she, and she was even happier that he was with her. "What do we do now?"

"Get some rest." Lord Erik lay back, the firelight washing over him and picking out the garnet flecks in his hair. "Not sure who shot at us or if they even meant to, but they won't make it through the snow to us tonight. And unless they know about this lodge, they won't find us at all."

Despite how tired she was, Violet found herself unable to close her eyes as the events of the day played through her thoughts. "Do you think they know about the lodge?"

"Doubtful. Hasn't been used much in years. And back when it was used, only James Prescott, my brother, and me spent any time out here. James Prescott isn't much for hunting and neither is his father, but Michael loved it."

Violet glanced over at Lord Erik as a dozen risqué thoughts played

her through her mind, and she huddled deeper under the blankets. She was definitely going to the place her mother kept warning her she would go if she wasn't better behaved.

Of course she was.

She was alone in a cabin with Lord Erik Gautin. One of the most attractive men in the ton. And also one of the most renowned rakes.

She'd had a small crush on him since they'd been children. Maybe more than a small crush. But he'd never shown that type of interest in her. She assumed it was because she was an upstanding young woman from a good family. While he'd earned his reputation, it was always with widows, unhappily married women, or courtesans.

Never the innocent.

And while Violet didn't want to be innocent, she was.

Though no one would believe that once they were rescued from the cabin. Her reputation would be ruined, and she would most likely be packed off to a convent. Or maybe sent to America with her brother. She wasn't certain if marrying an American would be better or worse than being packed off to a convent.

Either way, Violet would miss her family, even if her brothers were overbearing louts sometimes. She would miss her dearest friends. And she would miss the chance to have a family of her own.

She would suffer all the punishments of having given herself to a man before marriage even if she had done nothing other than be shot at while she waited for her brother to return with help.

At least she could have earned the punishment, and Lord Erik Gautin could have taught her all the things she wasn't supposed to know.

Yes, she was definitely going where her mother warned her she would.

"Hey, things look pretty bad, but it's going to be okay," Lord Erik promised. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

Violet believed him. She shouldn't, but she did.

Erik tucked the blankets around her and took her cup. "Get some rest. It was a hard trek out here, and the snow didn't make it any easier."

She shuddered as the gunshot rung through her memory. "What if…"

"I'm here. I won't let anything happen to you," Lord Erik promised.

And he wouldn't. Somehow, he'd gotten her through a blizzard to a comfortable and warm lodge. She was drinking tea that was more than just tea and nestled under a pile of furs when she should be frozen on the side of the road.

Lord Erik Gautin would keep her safe, and he would be there for her when she awoke.

Violet smiled up at him and scooted closer. She could finally close her eyes.

~

When Violet woke up again, her head was on Lord Erik's shoulder. He was still sound asleep, mitigating her embarrassment a little.

She took a moment to study him. He was handsome. Not just handsome, but gorgeous. She understood why he had so many women clambering after him. It also explained why he was said to be magnificent in the bedroom.

He'd had plenty of opportunities to practice.

Violet blew out a breath as she fought with herself not to reach out and brush the lock of his coffee-colored hair back from his forehead.

The closest she'd ever been to a gentleman before had been the country dances she'd been permitted. Then she'd been surrounded by a roomful of dowagers that would make certain both she and her partner were perfectly proper.

Violet had never been allowed to waltz with anyone but one of her brothers. Which hadn't been fun for her or for them.

This was entirely different.

She had her head on Lord Erik Gautin's shoulder, and he was so close all that separated them were their fur blankets.

She swallowed as she closed her eyes.

It seemed terribly unfair that all of society would see her as ruined when she knew nothing more after a night beside a notorious rake than she had the previous morning.

Granted, Violet knew more than most ladies her age did or should about such things.

She'd spent a lot of time listening to the maids and snooping. Not that she'd glimpsed anything other than the barn cats or her brothers' prized hounds.

But that had only piqued her curiosity further.

How could something be so sinful, so condemned by society, yet so enjoyable that people did it, anyway?

None of it made sense to Violet, and she very much wanted it to make sense.

According to the gossips, Lord Erik Gautin made it make sense.

Violet shivered under her fur blanket, and its soft underside rubbed against her sensitive skin and nipples. She'd never been permitted to

sleep naked before, and she let it rub against her a few more times, delighting in the sensation.

Violet bit her lip and closed her eyes, trying to fall back asleep. While her body was still exhausted from their trek through the snow, her mind wouldn't quiet. Not only was she contending with facing ruin, life in a convent, and lying beside the most notorious rake in the ton, but someone had shot at her.

Possibly tried to kill her.

She stared at the shadows on the ceiling as she processed it.

Who would want to kill her, and why? And if they were trying to kill her, why had they waited so long? She had been stuck in the carriage for half the afternoon, waiting for her brother to return.

Unless they weren't after her at all.

It could have simply been hunters, and the gunshots had scared the horses.

Except no one sane would be out hunting in a blizzard like that. And she'd smelled blood.

No, the shots had definitely been fired at them.

But if they weren't after her… She stared at Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt and notorious rake. Perhaps he'd angered a jealous husband. Though they would most likely call him out.

Or perhaps not.

The Earl of Marquardt was renowned as both an accurate shot and a fast one. It seemed seduction wasn't the only thing he practiced, even if there weren't many other things he bothered with.

That wasn't fair.

Violet knew little about him since his return from France besides what the gossips said. But before he'd left, he had been a good person. The type of person her brothers had called a friend. If she were honest, they still called him a friend even if they wished he would stop behaving so abominably.

She had even heard her brother Robert comment more than once that Lord Erik was hurting himself more than he was breaking the hearts of others.

Besides, Violet wouldn't want anyone to form their opinion of her based on nothing but gossip. Gossips were cruel and best ignored.

While her brothers had maintained their friendship with Lord Gautin, it saddened her at how distant she and he had become. Once, she had chatted and laughed with Lord Erik Gautin. He'd told her stories. Teased her. Then, one day, Lord Erik had stopped talking to her altogether, and he always disappeared whenever she was around.

Violet figured it had to do with her being an unwed female. Lord Erik couldn't be seen speaking with her or they'd try to leg-shackle him. Since his return from France, he had done everything possible to

avoid matrimony.

Made Violet wonder what had happened.

Before he'd left, Lord Erik had been investing in the funds so he could support a family comfortably, even as a second son. At least, that's what she'd overheard her brothers saying. Not that she was supposed to have been listening, but anytime they had spoken of Lord Erik, Violet had eavesdropped.

She blew out a breath as she gazed at the attractive man beside her.

The whole thing was such a bore and so unfair. If Lord Erik Gautin didn't want to marry her, he didn't want to marry her. That shouldn't mean she had to lose a childhood friend.

And it wasn't like Violet had much to say about who she would marry, anyway. Her brothers didn't care who she wanted to marry, especially if it was a handsome rake. One that would break her heart if she let him.

No, her brothers expected her to make an appropriate match with an appropriate gentleman. And not just any appropriate gentleman, but one her eldest brother, the current Earl of Northwick, deemed appropriate.

While her family trotted her out to all the normal events to be inspected and judged, as most young ladies were, Violet was no particular beauty. She was petite with the figure to match. Filling out her ballgowns was always an issue, and she didn't have lovely golden hair or big blue eyes.

She would not land a gentleman based on her appearance alone.

Nor was she particularly charming or witty. But then charm and wit seemed more determined by a lady's willingness to repeat what a gentleman wanted to hear than anything intrinsic to her own thoughts.

So Violet would marry based on whatever arrangement her eldest brother made for her. She was pretty enough, had a good dowry, and family connections. As long as her eldest brother didn't try to saddle her with someone twice her age, Violet would acquiesce.

Not because she wanted to, but because that was what was done.

And it was way better than what her bosom bow, Miss Liliana Spencer, could expect.

While the whole thing was less than ideal, Violet had been bracing for it most of her life. She'd also been studying the older ladies to learn how they coped with it. And it seemed as if most of them concentrated on friends, lovers, or family, with the first two being the most common.

Violet had her two bosom bows and several acquaintances for companionship.

Granted, Lady Aurora had just married the awful Duke of Erembour. Well, awful to everyone but Lady Aurora. There was a reason Violet had thought them a good match even before the duke had offered for her. While Duke Erembour was dark, brooding, and terrified most young ladies, Lady Aurora wasn't most young ladies.

The ton was still tittering about how the duke had fallen in love with Lady Aurora. Some were even calling it the tale of Beauty and the Beast.

Violet would have felt sympathy for her dear friend, except Lady Aurora was in love with the brooding duke. Violet didn't envy her bosom bow the man she'd married, but Lady Aurora was deliriously happy.

That Violet did envy.

But Violet would find her own happiness. After she'd married and produced the requisite heir and spare for her husband, she had every intention of learning just why so many women took lovers.

And she planned to start with Lord Erik Gautin.

Because she had always been slightly infatuated with him. And not just because he was handsome as sin. But he made her feel beautiful, even though she wasn't. He made her laugh. And he cared for her.

Made certain she was safe even when it meant carrying her through hip deep snow in the middle of a blizzard.

But he'd always been like that.

At least he had before he'd returned from France.

While Lord Erik Gautin was notorious for his philandering ways now, there had been more to him once.

A lot more.

Of course, that could just be her observing him through childish hero worship. After all, he had been friends with her brothers, and he'd seemed so impressive. Good at hunting, at swordsmanship, at pistols.

Later, he'd excelled at dancing. His cravat was always perfect, and he knew how to include his best friends' sister so she never felt left behind or like a tagalong.

Violet glanced over at him again, and his eyes opened, a beautiful honey-gold in the dim light. She swallowed hard as realized he'd caught her staring at him, but she didn't look away.

A smile curved his mobile lips. "You look like you're doing better than you were."

"I was more than half frozen and so exhausted I could barely move. I am doing a lot better, thanks to you." Violet paused. "You saved my life, Lord Gautin. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"A smile would do it."

She couldn't help smiling up at him.

Lord Erik grinned back at her. “There, all the payment I need.”

He stretched, exposing his strong arms and shoulders. Violet felt a warmth at her core that had nothing to do with temperature. She hoped the fur blanket would slip further down and offer her a glimpse of his chest.

If she was going to be ruined, she might as well deserve it.

Ruined.

A shudder stole through her as she considered what waited for her back at the Prescott’s, and she huddled deeper under the fur.

“Still cold?” Lord Erik asked.

“Yes. A little.”

“Me, too. Not sure we’ll ever warm up. Once my clothes dry, I’ll head back out and get us more wood.”

Violet nodded and shivered under the blanket, as much from her thoughts as the cold. She didn’t want to spend her life in a convent, nor did she want to marry someone thrice her age and hide in the country until he left her a widow.

As bad as waiting for her brother to select a husband for her had been, being ruined was worse. And it hadn’t even been her fault.

Maybe she should have stayed in the carriage.

Lord Erik turned on his side and studied her. He touched the tips of his fingers to her cheek. “You’re cold.”

Violet nodded again.

“You know I’d never hurt you. Never take anything you didn’t want to give.”

She laid her hand over his, enjoying the warmth of his palm against her cheek. “I know.”

He laid his blanket over hers, then slid under her blanket beside her. Wrapping his arms around her, Lord Erik Gautin held her naked body against his.

Warmth flooded Violet. The heat of him wrapped around her and comforted her. His scent was crisp and clean, windswept like the winter snow.

He tucked her close and brushed his lips over her forehead in far too chaste of a kiss. “Maybe now we’ll both be warm enough to sleep.”

But she didn’t want to sleep.

She didn’t want to miss a moment of laying naked in his arms.

Heat seeped through her core, heat that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with him.

This was bad.

Very, very bad.

He may not take anything she didn’t want to give, but she suddenly wanted to give him everything. Violet pressed closer to Lord Erik and wrapped her arms around him.

Chapter 3

Fate was a harsh mistress. Or maybe she was giving him his chance. Erik wasn't certain. All he knew for sure was the young lady he'd wanted to court, and whose family had rejected him, was now lying naked in his arms.

And the two of them were alone.

Of course, there might also be someone trying to kill them.

Erik listened for a moment, but the wind still howled. If someone was searching for them, there was no way they'd find him and Lady Violet until the snow cleared. Then, the would-be-assailant would also be contending with search parties.

Erik would not be making it to the Prescott's before the storm, but perhaps this was better. Better for him, anyway.

Way worse for Lady Violet.

Erik understood the morays of the ton, and he knew how they differed for men and women. While his reputation would barely be touched by their time alone in the hunting lodge, hers would be ruined.

It would be almost impossible for her to make any match at all, much less a good one.

Shoddy way for Erik to get a wife, but at least her brother would entertain his suit now. Lord Dominic Pemberley, Earl of Northwick, was a stubborn and arrogant man, but he wasn't a fool. Erik had been friends with him long enough to know that.

Which was why when Lord Dominic had told him to go to Hell for even suggesting courting Lady Violet, Erik had never brought it up again.

But now, even Lord Dominic would have to accept Erik's suit. Not just his suit, but his proposal of marriage.

And Lady Violet would be all but forced to accept it as well.

Such garbage.

But Erik didn't make the rules. He could be a cad and walk away. Erik didn't have to offer for her. It was the gentlemanly thing to do, the right thing to do, but no one thought him capable of either.

But he'd be a fool if he didn't. Erik might be a good-for-nothing,

but he wasn't a fool. He'd been half-in-love with Lady Violet for most of his life, and there was no other woman he wanted as his wife.

Her brother was correct, and she deserved better than Erik. But that wasn't something he could help now.

Even if Erik didn't touch her, didn't kiss her, no one would believe it. They wouldn't believe it of a regular gentleman, much less him. Lady Violet was already guilty according to the ton, and that's all that would matter.

Lord Dominic might never forgive him, but Erik cared a whole lot less about his childhood friend than he did about seeing Lady Violet cared for and happy. He could do the one for her, but he wasn't certain about the other. Still, he would try.

Maybe he could convince her that marrying him wasn't an all bad thing. She'd be a countess, after all, and the mistress of Hartmore and the Marquardt house in Mayfair. Erik tried to think of other benefits that would accrue to her for marrying him, but he wasn't certain there were any.

He'd have to remedy that.

And while all of her brothers would hate the idea of Lady Violet marrying him, they would hate seeing their sister shunned more. Hate seeing her lose her place in society. Hate seeing her lose her chance at a family of her own.

Erik could give her that. Wanted to give her that. Had always wanted to give her that.

He cuddled her close, and her soft hair brushed over his chest.

Oh yes, he wanted to give her that.

Violet nuzzled into him. Warm, sweet, genuine.

He didn't deserve her. He was a good-for-nothing, but he was a good-for-nothing that would try his best to be good to her.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she instinctively pressed closer to him. A soft "oh" escaped her as her bare breasts brushed against him, but she didn't pull away.

"Warmer?" he asked.

"Much."

The word was soft, almost a purr, and Erik's body responded. He let it. Just because it wanted something didn't mean he had to give in to it.

"No idea if it's still night or morning yet," he said.

She turned toward the window. "Looks like it's still night, but with the snow coming down like that, hard to tell."

"We're safe and warm in here."

"Because of you. Thank you for that."

"Anyone would have done it."

Violet propped herself up so she could meet his gaze. "No, anyone

wouldn't have. You did, and I thank you for it."

It almost sounded like a compliment, and that made him uncomfortable. "Sorry you're going to miss the Prescott's house party."

"I'm not."

"You're not?"

She lifted her slim shoulders, rubbing her pert breasts against him in the most delicious way. "Why would I be? It's just another place for people to watch me, for prospective suitors to decide if I am up to their standards, all while Dominic arranges a marriage for me that he approves of. I'd rather be with Lady Aurora planning for the arrival of her baby."

"I didn't know Lord Dominic had gotten so political. He didn't use to be when we were kids."

"It started after Papa died. I think there was a lot he didn't know about until he had to untangle it."

"Probably," Erik agreed. He knew what a mess his brother had left him when he'd died. It was almost as if even after everything Michael had been taught, he still hadn't understood how to run the earldom.

"Your position gives you a seat in the House of Lords, too. Will you take it?" Violet asked.

"Not sure anything I have to say that would matter much."

Violet poked him in the chest. "Stop that. You're intelligent and were always good at solving puzzles."

"The headmaster at Eaton would say otherwise."

"Probably because you didn't bother to apply yourself."

"Are you going to visit Duchess Erembour after the Season?" Erik asked. He didn't want to talk about his time at Eaton and how difficult it had been to make everyone think his brother had been a lot smarter than Erik was. And Erik knew how to distract Lady Violet.

"Assuming my brother hasn't married me off to a tyrant that won't allow it," she said. "Lady Aurora could use the companionship, and I can't wait to meet her baby."

"I'm certain you'll find a way to see her, and Duke Erembour has a way of silencing all other tyrants."

Lady Violet grinned, a warm expression that lit up her whole face. "That he does, and he adores Lady Aurora. When she first told me she was marrying him, I thought he'd poisoned her and promised her the cure only if she married him."

Erik chuckled. "Sounds like something he would do."

"But if you ever see them together, I think he'd battle a horde of demons and win for her."

"You sound sad about that."

"Maybe a little jealous," Violet confessed. "Not of Duke Erembour,

but of the way he cares for Lady Aurora. I won't ever find that."

Erik's chest tightened. "Why do you say that?"

"I already told you Dominic's plans, and that was before this."

"I'm sorry." And he was. Erik didn't want to take anything from Lady Violet. While he was a good-for-nothing, he would at least try to make her as happy as she made him.

"Don't be sorry." Violet smiled up at him. Her soft, sweet smile that made his insides feel like melted chocolate. "You saved my life. Better to spend the rest of my days in quiet contemplation at a convent than dead in the snow. I wonder if Duke Erembour would allow me to visit Lady Aurora from the convent."

"It wouldn't have to be like that." Erik forced his words to stay even. He wasn't sure if Violet would prefer life in a convent, or if, like everyone else, she assumed he wouldn't do the right thing.

She shuddered. "Better that than being married off to a libertine three times my age."

No, he would never allow that. Not when there was so much he could do to change it. To make her happy. To keep her safe.

Still, his chest clenched as he stared down at her. As he begged for her to give him the answer he so desperately wanted, but didn't deserve. "You could marry me."

~

Violet's heart felt as if it had stopped in her chest, and she stared up into his honey-colored eyes. Her words escaped her in a whisper. "Please don't tease me."

His fingertips brushed her cheek. "I'm not. It's what I'm supposed to do. What I want to do."

It was what he was supposed to do. And while a part of her thrilled at the idea, another part of her didn't want anyone, not even the man she'd had a crush on half her life, out of obligation.

Erik stroked her bare shoulder and along the length of her arm. His touch was gentle, light, yet it sent tingles coursing through her.

She wanted him to touch her more.

To touch her everywhere.

"I'd make you a countess. Take care of you. And I wouldn't be a tyrant." A wicked grin teased over his lips. "Unless you asked me to be."

Violet licked her lips as her body responded to him, to his dangerous words she didn't understand but wanted to very much. To

the sensation of him hard and strong beside her. He was offering her everything half the ladies of the ton wanted.

But he would never truly be hers. Never love her as Lady Aurora was loved. And he could very well break her heart. She was already half in love with him. It wouldn't take much for her to fall totally in love with him. And only a fool loved a rake.

His mother had proven that, and she had died brokenhearted because of it.

Still, marrying a rake was better than being bundled off to a convent or married off to an old man that would paw at her.

At least Lord Erik Gautin would see to her needs in the bedroom, and if the feel of him beside her was any indication, that would be most pleasurable indeed.

But could she prevent herself from falling in love with him? And did it matter if she couldn't? Her alternatives were even less desirable. And it would be the chance to have a family of her own with a man she liked. Respected except for his philandering. She could actually talk to Lord Erik Gautin, and he didn't simply expect her to parrot his words back to him.

And she wouldn't cringe when he touched her. She would enjoy sharing her bed with him and would enjoy waking up to find him in bed beside her.

She just didn't want to share him with anyone else, and that was where the problems would arise.

But she also wasn't his mother. While she might learn to resent him because of his philandering, she could also take lovers of her own.

None of them would match up to the man she was only half in love with. Only half, she promised herself, not totally in love with. Though the lie brought color to her cheeks. How could she not be totally in love with the man that had carried her through the snow to safety?

And if there was anyone she wanted to teach her about all that could be between a man and a woman, it was Lord Erik Gautin.

Violet stroked a tentative hand across his chest. He was so hard, his skin so masculine. "I may be ruined, but I still don't know much."

He propped himself up on his elbow as he stared down at her. "Not sure if I should remedy that now or on our wedding night."

The firelight teased through his deep coffee-colored hair and grazed over the length of his shoulders and chest. Violet warred with herself. She wanted to touch him, to explore him, to learn all that had been kept hidden from her.

She also didn't want to be more of a disappointment than she already was.

If Dominic rejected Lord Erik's marriage proposal, he could very

well send her to a convent. And she would never know any of it.

But she wanted to know. Very much. And she wanted to learn with Lord Erik Gautin. The boy who had always been so kind to her, and the man who still protected her and cared for her.

Who better to teach her than one of the most notorious rakes in the ton?

Violet lifted a hand and stroked his bare chest and shoulders. He felt so good beneath her fingertips.

It was everything she had ever wanted.

"Now, definitely now," Violet whispered.

A smile curved Erik's lips, and he lowered his head. He brushed his lips over hers. Once. Twice. A third time.

It was a teasing gesture that promised so much more.

Then he kissed her.

And it felt like her whole insides had turned liquid.

Violet didn't know how such a tender touch could sear through her veins and leave her breathless and aching for more. But it did.

And she wanted more. Wanted all Erik could teach her.

She gave herself over to the kiss, offering him all he wanted. All he would take. His lips played against hers as he stroked her arms, her shoulders, her back. His touch amplified the sensation of the kiss, building a yearning deep within her.

Gently cupping her breast, Erik teased over her pert nipple. A quiet gasp escaped Violet, and she arched her back, filling his hand with her and rubbing her tender peak against his hard palms. Sensation shot through her.

Even as she felt so much, she still wanted more.

Violet wrapped her arms around Erik as she tried to anchor herself in the waves of desire. But she didn't back away from it. Not with Erik. She was safe with him. Protected. He would guide her. Show her all that could be.

Even if she couldn't possibly hope to absorb it all.

Erik continued to kiss her as his hands explored her. As he kept her close, wrapped in his arms. He trailed his lips over her neck, her collarbone, then caught her mouth with his again and deepened the kiss.

Violet had never been touched in such a way, never had anything ignite such heat in her. She wanted more. Wanted everything. She pressed closer, kissing him back as she did.

Her efforts were clumsy, untutored, but Erik cradled her against him as he slowed their pace and gave her the space to learn.

Everything about him was so warm, so strong, yet so gentle.

He nibbled her lips, parted them, then dipped inside.

The heat flowing through Violet intensified.

So much. Too much.

She couldn't believe she was kissing Lord Erik Gautin. Couldn't believe the sensation of his mouth on hers. And the scandal of it.

But she never wanted him to stop.

Everything about him felt so good. Too good.

His touch stayed gentle as he eased her into his lap so she was straddling him. He wrapped them both in the furs as he continued to kiss her. Now he had full access to both of her breasts. Access to all of her.

Access he exploited.

Violet sucked in a breath as she stared down at herself, spread before him like a hoyden. A hoyden that seemed to elicit the same desire in him that he did in her.

Rather than feeling embarrassed, as she knew she ought, Violet felt beautiful and powerful.

She teased her fingertips through his beautiful hair, and a quiet growl escaped him as he deepened their kiss.

Lord Erik traced the swells of her breasts and swirled over and around her pert nipples. He taunted and teased them to hardened peaks, then lifted his head from hers so he could draw first one, then the other into the hot wet recesses of his mouth.

Violet gasped as she held him to her. As fresh sensation assaulted her. She was overwhelmed by all of it, but she wanted it. All of it. Wanted him. She had no idea where all of this was going, where he was taking her, but she wanted to go.

"Erik," she whimpered.

So much was building within her. A deep ache at her core. A need only he could fill. And she desperately wanted him to fill it.

He answered by laving her peaks as he stroked the underside of each of her breasts.

Violet gripped his shoulders, never wanting him to stop, but not certain how much pleasure she could absorb.

As he continued to lick and suck her rosy peaks, his fingers traced the outline of her. Down the indentation of her waist and over her rounded hips. He stroked her thighs. First along the outside, then along the sensitive inside.

Violet's throat tightened as he touched her in the most forbidden and scandalous of places, yet she ached for him to continue. Yearned for his next touch, even as everything she'd ever been taught said she shouldn't.

He lifted his mouth from her breasts and kissed her. Violet lost herself in the drugging pleasure of the kiss, even as he eased his hand higher into the thatch of dark curls at the juncture of her thighs.

A frisson of fear slid through her, but not because she wanted him

to stop. Quite the opposite. But she didn't understand all that was happening, and the waves of pleasure pouring through her made it difficult to think.

To do anything other than want more and trust in Erik to give it to her.

Erik was gentle, cupping her and giving her time to adjust to the sensation of his large, hard hand on her most intimate of places.

Yet, it felt so good. So right.

Violet couldn't help but wriggle against him.

And sensation exploded through her.

She gripped Erik's shoulders even as he held her closer. What was happening to her? She really was the harlot her mother had warned her about.

Maybe not a harlot as she could never imagine allowing anyone else to touch her in such a way, much less want them to do it as she wanted Erik to touch her.

He brushed his lips over her neck and shoulders as he stroked her womanly softness. He then slid between her tender folds, covering his fingers in her wetness.

Color stole over Violet's cheeks, and she started to apologize.

He kissed her again. "Nothing to be sorry about. It means you like what we're doing, and your body is getting ready for me."

Ready for him.

She wasn't entirely certain what that meant, though the maids' whispers offered a clue. Still, she ached for his touch, his kiss. Her whole body wanted more of him. She wriggled her hips against his hand, and a gasp escaped her as his fingers brushed against the little bundle of nerves at the apex of her sex.

"Yes, like that," Erik whispered as he stroked his thumb over her nubbin.

His name fell from her lips as heat and need sparked through her. Violet clung to him, and she arched her hips to press herself against his thumb. She didn't know what he was doing to her, but she never wanted him to stop.

Erik held her close as he continued to kiss her, caress her, build the heat deep within her.

She wanted more, so much more, but she didn't have the words for it. Instead, she gave herself over to him. Allowing him to show her all that could be between them.

And he did.

With each touch. Each kiss.

Until Violet's whole body was alight with need.

She stared up at Erik, a soft smile on his face as he gazed at her naked in his lap. He trailed kisses down her neck and along her

collarbone. “You are so beautiful, Violet.”

She wanted him to mean it. Wanted all that she felt to be real. And it was, if only for the moment.

Erik cradled her closer, seeming to understand exactly what he was doing to her, exactly what she needed. He slid a single finger into her tight passage as he continued to stroke her nubbin.

She should be mortified that he would touch her there. Instead, the extra fullness intensified everything else she was feeling.

Violet clung to him as she ceded further control to Erik.

Control he took as he guided her higher and higher up the slopes of desire. Pushing her. Leading her to some unknown destination.

The feel on him holding her, his lips on hers as he surrounded her, as he touched her inner-most recesses…

Then she was where he had been taking her, and Violet’s whole body ignited in fulfilled pleasure.

The feeling was so intense she cried out for Erik as wave after wave shook through her. He cradled her against him, gentling his kisses as he coaxed all the pleasure he could from her. Violet slumped against him, her body spent and thoroughly content.

Violet now understood why people engaged in such a forbidden act. And if Erik could give someone as untutored as her all that he had, she also understood why he had the reputation he did.

Violet didn’t want to wait until morning to experience such pleasure again. She wanted him right then.

She truly was the hoyden her mother had warned her about. At least she was for Lord Erik Gautin.

Chapter 4

The sight of Violet languid in his arms, her lids heavy with spent pleasure, filled Erik with bone-deep satisfaction. He wanted to earn that expression from her every night. Erik wasn't certain what she thought about separate rooms, but if she wanted them, he would just come to her every night.

He wanted her to sleep in his arms after thoroughly pleasuring her, and if she were his wife, he wouldn't have to slip out before the sun rose.

Violet. As his wife.

The thought made him grin.

He had wanted to marry her for so long. To make a life with her. He was thankful that he had been given the chance. It wasn't the most noble or chivalrous of ways, but he would not squander it.

He would do everything he could to make her happy. To be the best husband he could be to her. His grin widened as he held her close.

Violet traced a hand over his chest and shoulders, her fingers gentle, yet thorough. She paused to rub the pad of her thumb over his nipple.

She smiled when it responded, pebbling much as hers did.

Her gentle touch ignited something deep within him, and Erik grit his teeth to tamp down his own desire as she continued to explore him. Along his sides, over his ridged abdomen, down to the head of his cock.

She paused there, and he expected her to retreat.

But she didn't.

Instead, she stroked down over the tip and paused at the drop of moisture.

Erik took her hand and brought it to his lips. "I already want you. Let's not intensify that."

She stared up at him. "You want me?"

He hated how little they taught ladies. How little they explained. It was amazing how little even some married women knew.

"You're still a virgin. What we did was foreplay of a sort. The

actual act that will relieve you of your virginity is when I put this inside of you where my finger was earlier."

She stroked a hand over his cock. "But this is much bigger than your finger. Is that why it hurts so much?"

"Not really. Your first time, there is a thin barrier that is broken when I penetrate you. That's what hurts. But I can help make it hurt less if you are wet and ready for me."

"Like I am now?"

Erik swallowed and nodded.

"Are you going to ruin me?"

"Do you want me to?" He wanted her so much. Wanted to fulfill the promises their bodies were making. But he wouldn't. Not unless she wanted it.

He would never take anything a lady didn't offer, but with her, it was more than that. He loved her, and he needed her to want him as much as he wanted her.

Violet considered, and Erik almost laughed at her and at himself. This was ludicrous. Yet with Violet, he wouldn't have expected anything else. She had a mind of her own and would use it. One reason he loved her so much.

"I think I do," Violet finally said. "I would like to know what it's like in case my brother sends me to a convent instead of accepting your proposal. Assuming you meant it when you said…"

"I've never meant anything more." He touched his fingertips to her cheek in an almost reverent gesture. Yes, he wanted her as his wife. Wanted forever with her.

He cradled Violet close to him, then kissed her.

And he would show her that. Show her all that could be between them. Show her just how much he loved her.

This was not exactly the seduction he'd planned. Not how he'd imagined taking the woman that would be his wife would be.

But Erik had learned to take opportunities as they came.

And Violet was right. There was no guarantee her stubborn brother would accept his offer, even now.

He might have to steal away with her to Gretna Green.

Lord Dominic would be furious with him, but Erik was uncertain how the rest of her brothers would react. Lord Robert Pemberley had always been reasonable. While he may not have thought Erik the best choice for his sister, he wouldn't condemn Violet to a convent. And Lord Jackson Pemberley, well, he might applaud Erik for taking the initiative. The youngest of the Pemberley brothers had little patience for the rules of society.

So Lord Dominic would hate him, but Erik wasn't certain his childhood friend didn't already. Lord Dominic had changed since

becoming the Earl of Northwick. Something had happened, but what that something was, Erik didn't know. His childhood friend had even distanced himself from people he'd been friends with for years.

People like Erik.

Perhaps it was the power of the position. It could do that to men sometimes, as Erik had witnessed more than once.

But none of that mattered.

At the moment, all that mattered was Violet.

"If I do anything you don't like, anything that doesn't feel good, or you just want me to stop, tell me." Eric brushed his lips over hers. "This should be enjoyable, and it won't be if you don't talk to me. Tell me if I do something you don't like."

She stared up at him, her eyes dark in the dim light. "Really?"

"You're going to be my wife. We have to trust each other, especially here. Especially when we're so intimate."

A smile curved her lips, and she trailed her fingers through his hair and across his shoulders. "You've always made me feel safe. Protected."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"You make it sound like you don't."

"I do. Very much. But not at the cost of anything to you."

Violet tightened her fingers in his hair and drew him down to her, kissing him full on the mouth. Erik accepted that as his invitation, one he would act on until she revoked it.

He prayed she never revoked it, and he would do everything in his considerable power to continue to earn it.

Easing her back, he kissed her full lips as he stroked her pliant body. She was still warm and soft from her first completion, but the way she responded to his caresses promised she would soon be ready.

She was a passionate woman, and he looked forward to showing her all that could be between them.

Erik kissed her gently, slowly, caressing her back and shoulders as he did. Tracing the outline of her. The curve of her breasts. The indentation of her waist. The swell of her hips. Learning which parts of her elicited soft sighs and gentle moans.

Then exploiting it.

He soon had her writhing in answer to his touch, his kiss. Erik stroked her breasts, cupping them in his hands, then swirling his thumb over and around her nipples until he pulled them into taunt buds. He lowered his head and suckled first one, then the other.

Violet was so soft, so perfect, so delicately made. A part of him was terrified of hurting her. Another part of him remembered her spine of steel.

She arched her back, offering him more, even as she held him to

her breasts.

He laved each nipple in turn, then trailed his kisses lower, down over her abdomen and between her thighs.

He brushed his lips over her sex, and Violet propped herself up as she tilted her head at him.

Erik waited a moment to see if she asked him to stop. While he didn't want to shock her, he also wanted to heap as much pleasure on her as he could.

When she didn't object, he slid his tongue along her feminine slit, then dipped between tasting her. She was salty and sweet on his tongue. A smile curved his lips as a soft gasp escaped from her and her thighs fell open for him.

It might be her first time, but he would use every drop of knowledge he had to make her enjoy it and add it to the list of reasons that she should be his wife.

He smiled as he fastened his lips around her little nubbin.

~

Pleasure stormed through Violet.

She couldn't believe the wicked things he was doing with his mouth and tongue.

Things she never wanted him to stop doing.

Despite the chill of the room, the heat was rising within her once again, burning through her with a growing intensity. A growing need.

She gripped the furs as she parted her thighs wider for him and called his name.

Violet remembered the heights of pleasure he'd shown her, and she wanted it again. Wanted him again. But this time, she wanted him to join with her. For him to take his pleasure as he helped her reach her own.

Her whole body ached for him, ached for the release she knew was coming.

Then he lifted his mouth from her, and she whimpered, begging him to finish what he had again stared.

Erik slid between her thighs, parting her, and the weight of him pressed against her tender breasts. Some instinctive part of her reveled in the feel of him above her, the weight of his chest against her own, the tickle of his hair against her smooth skin.

Violet explored him.

His broad shoulders. Wide back. Muscular chest.

All of him felt so warm and good beneath her fingers. She scraped her nails down his back and reveled in the low growl that escaped him.

Erik kissed her again, focusing her attention on the dance of their lips and tongues. He then guided himself along her tender slit, coating himself in the wetness he had helped bring.

Violet gasped at the sensation.

He was so hot, so large, so thick.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders and squeezed her eyes closed as she waited for him to pierce her.

Instead, he teased light kisses over her eyelids, then captured her mouth with his. He stroked her breasts, her nipples, and teased the tender nubbin at the apex of her sex until she was gasping with need again.

Then he gently eased himself into her, cradling her as he did so.

There was a stab of pain between her thighs, and he held her close, kissing her as he seated himself the rest of the way within her.

And she was his. Violet had given herself to him completely. She should be shocked or mortified. Instead, she wrapped her legs around him and gasped as he slid deeper yet within her.

He continued to stroke her, to caress her, and soon the pain faded beneath the onslaught of desire. While still tender between her thighs, the sensation of him above her, within her, filling her so completely overwhelmed her.

Violet clung to him, her whole body taunt with need.

Then he began to move, slowly at first, adjusting his speed and angle until each thrust was pushing her higher and faster. Until she was gripping his shoulders with unrestrained need. His name falling from her lips over and over again.

She was a hoyden, but she was his hoyden. And she wanted him. Needed him to fill her, to take her, to show her the heights of pleasure again.

And he did.

Giving her all she asked for. All she needed.

Then she was there, her whole body tensing as wave after wave of fulfilled pleasure washed through her.

Violet clung to him, giving herself over to the rapture he brought her.

He thrust into her a final time, then withdrew and spilled himself across her bare stomach. After a moment, he wiped away the mess with a handkerchief and lay down beside her.

Gathering her into his arms, Erik kissed her brow. “If your brother doesn’t let you marry me, I will kidnap you from the convent and take you to Gretna Green.”

After what he had just shown her, Lord Erik Gautin would not have to kidnap her.

And that worried Violet more than anything.

Chapter 5

Grey light trickled in through the heavy curtains, and the blowing snow warned the storm still hadn't abated. Violet shivered beneath the warm furs, and Lord Erik Gautin tucked her closer to him.

The faint soreness between her thighs whispered to all they had done the night before, as did the heaviness in her limbs. Thick, languid pleasure still flowed through her, and she stared up at the man who'd promised to marry her.

She wasn't certain he would…

That wasn't true.

Lord Erik Gautin would marry her if Dominic permitted it. While Lord Erik was a rake, he'd always been a man of his word. The ladies who'd joined him in his bed had known exactly what they were getting.

Not that Violet blamed them, not now that she knew what could be between a man and a woman. It was a whole lot different than what she and most other young ladies expected in a marriage bed.

And what Lord Erik had already shown her was probably a whole lot more than most of them got.

She understood why he had his choice of partners.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I'm a little sore," Violet confessed. "But much less horrible than the stories."

He grimaced. "I can only imagine what you've heard."

She stroked a hand along his chest, delighting in the feel of his skin. She liked everything about him. His lips when he kissed her. The way his chest pressed against hers. Even his cock had felt good in her hand and had brought her pleasure inside of her.

Trailing her hand lower, she grazed the head of his shaft. "Still, I wouldn't mind another lesson in how pleasurable it can be."

He grinned, then kissed her. "I will arrange for it. But first, you should eat something to keep up your strength."

Keeping the furs wrapped around them, he sat up and held her in his lap. He reached over and grabbed a plate loaded with dried fruits, nuts, and honey.

Violet's stomach rumbled as she stared at the delicious offerings. "Where did you get this?"

"Lord James always keeps a stash of this kind of stuff in the hunting lodge. There's also your usual dried meat, but I thought you'd like this better."

She popped a fig into her mouth and smiled at the pure pleasure of it. After their race through the snow and the night together in each other's arms, she was starving. As she munched a date, she glanced at the rebuilt fire then over at his clothes laid out in front of it. They appeared very wet, as if he had recently been out in the snow.

She realized he had. To get wood to warm the lodge and possibly to go to the larder to find provisions. Because he would always take care of her. Protect her.

Violet nestled into him, and Erik tightened an arm around her.

He may have earned his reputation as a philanderer, but he hadn't earned his reputation as a good-for-nothing.

She still didn't know where that had originated.

Possibly his brother.

Lord Michael Gautin had always been jealous of Erik. She supposed it couldn't have been easy for Lord Michael. He'd been the elder brother and the heir. But Erik was the one that had inherited their father's exceptional good looks and charm. He was also the one that had been so clever with puzzles. Solving riddles, deciphering codes, unlocking puzzle boxes.

Not that any of it mattered.

Michael was gone, and even if he was the one that had spread the lies, Erik was the one that had lived up to them.

Violet couldn't help but wonder why.

Perhaps Erik was as hedonistic as everyone said he was, but a man didn't give as much in the bedroom as he just had if he were totally selfish.

Erik tapped her nose. "You're thinking big thoughts again."

"About you."

His eyes widened in mock surprise. "What could you possibly be thinking about me?"

A naughty smile curved her lips. "I'll tell you if you make me cry your name again."

He grinned and rolled her beneath him.

~

The late afternoon sun finally peeked through the windows, and Erik left Violet sleeping beneath the furs as he stared out at the white world. Nothing stirred in the frozen forests and fields, and a hush blanketed everything.

If someone had targeted them on the road, they hadn't yet found the cabin.

Nor did he think it likely they would find it before the search parties. Lord James Prescott would know about the lodge and the time Erik had spent there as a boy. It would be one of the first places he sent the parties.

Even still, no one would be going anywhere for some time.

A quick glance at the sky warned this break was temporary at best. More snow was coming. He was sorry for Violet's brothers. They would be panicking by now, but there was nothing he could do for it.

They all had to wait until the weather cleared.

In the meantime, he would enjoy the time alone with his fiancée. Though, she would most likely be his wife within a week of their rescue. It wouldn't take long for him to get a special license, and if Lord Dominic approved the marriage, Violet's brother would want them to say their vows quickly.

Should be easy enough to get a special license. Being the Earl of Marquardt had a few advantages.

Given the scandal surrounding their engagement, there would be no reading of the banns, nor would there be a large and elaborate wedding ceremony,

That suited Erik.

He enjoyed sleeping beside Lady Violet, and he had liked waking up with her in his arms. It was something he'd like to do every day, and after they escaped the cabin, he wouldn't be able to do that until they were married. In his estimation, it was best if they married quickly.

Besides, a small, private wedding saved him all the sniggers and triumphant smiles from those happy that he would now be leg-shackled.

Erik smiled over at Lady Violet.

If having such an amazing and responsive partner, one he got to fall asleep beside and wake up to, was being leg-shackled, then he should have done it a long time ago.

Would have if Lord Dominic would have allowed it.

He still didn't blame Lord Dominic.

Erik knew what his reputation was, and he'd earned it. It had been

easy, too easy, to lure ladies to his bed. He'd been barely sixteen when one of his mother's acquaintances had taken a fancy to him.

She'd taught him a lot, and he'd used it to learn a great deal more on his own. He'd never been lacking ladies eager to join him, and he enjoyed more mature partners. They knew what they wanted, what they liked, and many had been able to teach him even more.

And they knew the rules of the game. Most didn't want or expect him in their beds come dawn.

Erik glanced back at Lady Violet.

She'd been the first woman he'd deflowered. The first he'd slept beside.

She was different than all the others because he had every intention of making her his.

And she'd agreed.

Now he had to convince Lord Dominic.

As much as he threatened to kidnap her and steal away to Gretna Green, Erik didn't want to deprive her of her family. Lady Violet loved her brothers, and they were close friends of his.

He didn't want either of them to lose that.

A chill shook him, and Erik tossed another log on the fire. He climbed back under the furs and pulled Lady Violet close.

If it came to choosing between her and his childhood friends, Erik already knew his choice.

Chapter 6

A part of Violet figured she should get up, dress, and sit primly in front of the fire should rescuers arrive. Another part of her wanted them to find her naked in Lord Erik Gautin's arms so there would never be any question as to what had happened.

So that her brother would have to let them marry.

Fiend take her, but she was falling for one of the most notorious rakes in the ton. She knew better, yet her heart was being foolish.

Violet trailed her fingers over Erik's chest.

Not that Dominic would be wrong about what a poor choice Lord Erik was for a husband.

Dominic was seldom wrong, and that rankled all the more.

Marrying Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, would make her a countess, and a wealthy one, but it was still one of the worst possible matches.

Lord Erik was a rake, and Violet had no doubt he would continue to take paramours after they were married. She would be sharing her husband with half the ton, and everyone would know it.

Worst of all, so would she.

If it was any of the suitors her brother had been considering for her, Violet wouldn't have cared. Better to let some other women see to their needs after she had provided the heir and spare required. She would have lived a separate but happy life from the man whose name she shared.

As so many women in the ton did.

But it was different with Erik.

Fiend take her, but she was falling for him. Had already fallen for him. And that was bad. But asking him to change was like asking a bird not to fly. Still, it was better than being sent to a convent. At least she would enjoy creating the heir and spare. And she wanted a family.

It would also allow her to keep her place in society. To take tea with her mother. See her brothers. And not be a stain on the Pemberley family name.

Neither she nor Lord Erik had chosen to be shot at or trapped together alone in a snowstorm. Society dictated one proper outcome

from such a thing, and Violet had even less of a choice than he did in following society's decree.

She wouldn't make a respectable match after having spent a carriage ride alone with Lord Erik Gautin, much less an entire night, even if nothing had happened between them.

She smiled as she remembered the night in his arms, and something deep inside of her ignited. No matter what else, she would never be as naïve as she had been.

And she didn't want to be.

What she did want was Lord Erik Gautin all to herself. Which was foolish. But it didn't change her heart any. And Violet couldn't imagine giving herself to anyone as she had Erik. Allowing them to touch her as he had.

To fill her.

Few would have bothered to be so gentle, to make certain they weren't hurting her as they took what they wanted.

Fewer still would have ensured that her pleasure matched theirs.

Yes, Lord Erik Gautin had earned his reputation. And his handsome face and sculpted body were only part of the reason.

Erik stroked her cheek. "What's wrong? You look sad."

"Worried about what happens when we leave here."

He gently tucked her hair behind her ear. "First, I convince your brother that a life with me is better than a life in a convent. Might not be by much, but at least he'll get to see you a lot more often, and I think I'll make you happier."

He tried to sound light-hearted, but Violet could tell he was worried. "You think my brother is going to object."

"I think all three of them are going to object. Dominic…"

"Dominic what?"

"It doesn't matter," Lord Erik said. "I will find a way to convince him. You are his sister, and he wants the best for you."

"And you're not the best for me?"

He touched his lips to hers, softly, gently, but a kiss that whispered of so much more. "I will try to be."

Violet wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled close. She didn't doubt he'd try, though she did doubt how successful he would be. Doubted they could really find a way forward without her heart breaking.

She would love him completely and totally if she knew she didn't have to share him. If she knew he would be hers. And that was the mistake his mother had made with his father. Why she was so bitter. So angry.

Because he never would be hers and hers alone.

Erik brushed his lips across her forehead. "I will convince your

brothers. I don't know how, but I will. Then we'll be married. Soon. After that, we'll go out to Hartmore. It's the earldom's country home and where I grew up. It's quieter out there than London, and it'll give us time together. There's a lot I'm supposed to do there this time of year, but we'll still have lots of time to really learn about each other. Perhaps in the fall we could take a trip to Italy."

"Are you okay with leaving London?" Her voice caught on the words.

Erik smoothed her hair. "I am if you're with me. It's pretty lonely out there normally, but we'll be together. And you like riding. Much more fun to ride out at Hartmore than in London."

"Together," Violet murmured.

It was hard to think of herself as his wife, but it was also hard to imagine not being beside him. A part of her didn't want their time snowbound to end.

At least then he was hers and hers alone.

She didn't like the jealous turn of her thoughts.

Best to accept that he was a rake. If she didn't, his proclivities would only hurt her in the long term. But that meant not falling in love with him. Something she was wasn't certain she could prevent. Something she wasn't certain hadn't already happened.

Violet didn't want to become the bitter and heartbroken woman his mother had been.

"I remember when you and your brothers used to come out and visit us at Hartmore," Lord Erik said.

"It's been awhile." Violet laid her head on his chest. "A lot has happened since then."

"My parents are gone. Michael's gone. Your father's gone." Erik blew out a breath. "A lot has happened."

"It'll be our home. We'll make it warm and inviting, a place friends can stay for biscuits and a cup of tea."

Erik grinned. "I'd like that. A place where our children can grow up."

Children.

Violet swallowed at the thought.

She would need to provide that requisite heir and spare for Lord Erik Gautin, and maybe a few more for good measure.

The idea appealed to her.

She wanted to think of Erik as a good father, but he would probably be like most gentleman. Distant. An influence, but not involved in their rearing.

That saddened Violet. She thought he would both enjoy children, and, surprisingly, be a good father.

She could see him teaching his sons how to fish, how to shoot a

pistol, how to ride a horse. And he would enjoy it. At least the person he had been growing up would have. She was less certain now, though she should focus on what she knew about him and not what the gossips said.

Yes, he would be an excellent father if given a chance. And that chance had to include more than the physical part of making them. She would have to make certain he knew he was both included and wanted.

But those were thoughts for after they had their first child. For the moment, she wanted to enjoy what little time she had Lord Erik Gautin all to herself.

She grinned as she lay back on the soft furs and opened her arms to her fiancé.

~

The wintry morning sun pounded on the windows, and Erik tucked the blankets around Lady Violet. She was still ensconced in the warm sleep of their joining, and he didn't want to disturb her. However, the nape of his neck prickled in warning.

He drew the heavy drapes over the windows, cutting off even the sliver of light. He then banked the fire. The room was still warm, and the snow surrounding the hunting lodge would help insulate it, but it would not give off an easily discernable smoke trail.

Erik wasn't certain if that was a good idea or a bad one.

But if Lord Dominic, the Prescotts, or any of the Pemberley brothers were searching for Lady Violet, they would know to look for them at the lodge. If there was someone else searching for them, Erik wasn't certain he wanted to be easy to find.

Someone had shot at them, and he still didn't know who.

Violet blinked up at him, and when she sat up, the fur blanket slipped around her, giving him a tantalizing glimpse of her smooth shoulders.

He ignored the stab of desire. There would be time for that after they escaped from the cabin, and she married him.

"What are you doing up and dressed?" Lady Violet asked.

"Search parties should be here today. If I know your brothers, they left at first light."

A sad look passed over her face, and she tugged the fur blanket up higher.

Erik sat beside her and brushed his lips over hers. "You're worried

about what your brothers are going to say, what they're going to think, but don't be. I'll take the blame for all of it. Say I seduced you."

"But that's not true."

"Doesn't matter. It's what they'll believe, anyway. No point in diminishing you in their eyes, and the result is still the same."

"But it's not. They'll never forgive you."

"They already won't. Doesn't matter if your reputation would have been in tatters whether we did anything to earn it or not. Your reputation was jeopardized because of me. So let me take the fall."

Violet squared her slim shoulders, but she didn't argue. Instead, she slid out from under the heavy furs and started to dress.

While Erik wanted her to stay warm and nestled, he realized she needed to face the rescue party as well. And if it was the gunman who found them first, he didn't want her to be at any disadvantage. He helped her back into her clothes and laced up the back of her gown.

Lady Violet shivered against the cold fabric and cooling room, so Erik sat back down with her and wrapped them both in the heavy furs. She laid her head against his shoulder. An entirely improper gesture by the standards of society, but it felt so good, so right. He never wanted her to move.

And soon, he would have the right to hold her in his arms every night and during the day. The finickiest dowagers might grumble, but they would also smirk.

He touched his temple against the top of her head. Lady Violet fit against him so perfectly, as if she were meant to be there. A smile curved his lips. Maybe she was.

"Tell me more about Hartmore," Violet whispered. "It's been years since I visited, and soon it'll be my home."

He hadn't been there as much as he should have been. Some would say he was enjoying his hedonistic life in London too much.

Which was what he wanted them to believe.

Better that than the truth.

Still, he told her what he remembered, but more than that, he whispered of his hopes for the future.

One he would make there with her.

And that warmed him more than a full fire in the hearth could.

He just had to keep them both alive long enough to realize it.

Chapter 7

The morning sun was midway through the sky when Violet heard voices. They carried on the wind and blew across the heavy snow. The snow absorbed much of what they were saying, but Violet recognized the timbre of her brothers' voices.

Lord Erik tensed beside her. He was worried, and she hadn't forgotten that someone had shot at them, either.

Still, she had figured it had to be an attack of opportunity. Though that didn't answer why they had left her broken carriage alone and waited for his.

"It's Dominic and Robert," Violet whispered.

Lord Erik dipped his head in agreement, but he still listened and waited. As the voices drew closer, he tucked the furs around her and peered out the window without disturbing the curtains. It was strange to see him act with such care, and Lord Erik Gautin suddenly reminded her of Robert during his first days home from France.

While Lord Erik had served before his brother had died and he'd become earl, Lord Erik hadn't seen any combat.

At least Violet didn't think he had.

He had supposedly been in France overseeing logistics and supply chain. A non-combat position. But now she wondered.

"They also brought James Prescott and a sleigh," Lord Erik said.

"Must've been pretty certain we were here." Or they were planning to haul back their frozen bodies, but Violet didn't say that.

She shivered. She didn't even want to think it.

Erik rubbed her shoulders and held her close. But as the voices grew closer, he tucked the furs around her and positioned himself beside the fireplace.

When their rescuers finally unburied the door and yanked it open, Erik relaxed a little, though Violet still sensed his tension. There was more to him than the carefree rake he pretended to be. But she'd already known that.

She wondered if anyone else did.

And she wondered what had really happened in France.

Lord Dominic Pemberley pushed his way through the entry. He

filled the doorway as his gaze swept over the room, and Violet noticed he wore a sword and a pair of pistols strapped to his side.

Her brothers had expected trouble.

After a moment, Lord Dominic's gaze landed on her, and he blew out a breath. "Thank God you're safe."

"Thank Lord Erik Gautin," Violet said. "I would have died if not for him."

Dominic's face hardened, and his gaze followed hers to where Erik stood beside the glowing embers of the hearth. Dominic's jaw flexed. "Thank you for getting my sister out of the blizzard."

Lord Erik dipped his head, but he said nothing.

James Prescott pushed past Dominic and crouched down beside Violet. "Are you hurt? Injured?" He almost sounded hopeful.

"No, I'm fine, but thank you."

James Prescott turned to Lord Erik, but he said nothing.

"We'll take you back to the Prescott's," Lord Dominic said.

"No," Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, interrupted. And while he never dropped his nonchalant pose, there was a steel in his words that forced Dominic to turn toward him.

"If you want to stay here, that's fine. But she's my sister-"

"And we're taking her to Northford where she and I will be married."

Dominic clenched his hands into fists. "You are bloody well not marrying my sister!"

"There is nothing else to do but for me to marry her," Lord Erik said as he stared down at her brother. "Whatever you're thinking happened here, so is every dowager, every matron, and every gentleman. I will not allow you to subject Lady Violet to that kind of scrutiny, ridicule, and humiliation. Not when I can make it right."

Lord Erik never raised his voice, never grew impatient, but he also never wavered.

Violet had never seen this side of him.

Lord Dominic tightened his fists. "We'll discuss it further at the Prescott's."

"No, we won't," Lord Erik said as he pushed off the mantle. "Lady Violet does not need to endure the speculation or the whispers. We go to Northford, I marry her, and I take her out to Hartmore. By the end of summer, no one will remember any of this has happened."

"How convenient for you," Lord Dominic sneered.

"Better a bit of convenience for me than Lady Violet being shunned, or worse, leaving her to die in the snow." Lord Erik didn't flinch under Dominic's iron gaze. "Too bad you weren't in the carriage with her and Captain Pemberley. Never would've come to this."

Violet stared at Lord Erik a moment, again surprised at the steel in

his words and how unflinchingly he stared down her brother. But Erik was correct, and as he usually did, he saw the inconsistencies. Noticed only Robert had been with her when normally both Robert and Dominic accompanied her.

Particularly to a house party.

Dominic had not come with her and Robert like he normally did. Violet had wondered why, but it hadn't bothered her.

But Erik knew where to strike, and that's where he'd hit.

Hard.

Violet wondered where he had learned such skills.

Lord Dominic glared at his childhood friend, a man who was also an earl and not intimidated by Dominic.

James Prescott stood and touched Dominic's shoulder.

Dominic shoved him off, turned, and stormed out of the lodge.

"That was harsh," James Prescott murmured to Lord Erik.

"Maybe, but he needed to hear it." Lord Erik's gaze slid to Captain Pemberley. "You did everything you could. I'd say I'm sorry it came to this, but I won't disparage Lady Violet like that. You ever figure out who disabled your carriage or who shot my horse?"

Captain Pemberley glanced toward the door and shook his head. But Violet noted he didn't argue with either of Erik's assertions.

"We should go to Northford," Lord James said. "As much as Lord Dominic doesn't like it, your plan is the best one. We just didn't think…"

"I would do the right thing? Glad to prove you wrong." Erik turned his back to them and offered Violet his arm.

She accepted it and followed him back out to the sleigh that their rescuers had brought, but there was no sign of Dominic.

~

Violet sat beside her brother and opposite Lord Erik as they finally reached Northford. It was a modestly sized town, and the recent snowstorm had all but halted travel into it. Her brother, Captain Robert Pemberley, had no difficulty finding them accommodations.

Word must not yet have reached town as to Violet's misadventures. No one more than glanced at her. Though that could have been the protective Earl of Marquardt at her side that shielded her from any curious glances.

The inn was elegant, the rooms spacious, and the smells coming

from the kitchen made Violet's stomach rumble.

Lord Erik squeezed her shoulders and led her to a private room at the back of the inn. He ordered several savory dishes as Captain Pemberley followed them.

"You must be hungry after living on dried fruit, and your brothers will be hungry after traipsing through the snow to rescue us."

"You're not staying?" Captain Pemberley asked.

"I need to get that special license, and I can't get it in Northford," Lord Erik reminded him. "You should also be certain to get word to your mother. I would like her here if there is any way she can safely make it."

"I will see what can be arranged," Captain Robert Pemberley said.

Lord Erik took Violet's hand and bowed over it. "I will be back as quickly as I can."

"I look forward to it," Violet said. And she meant it.

Lord Erik Gautin smiled at her, a smile that held so much promise, and now she understood what he was promising.

He then left her with her brother and James Prescott.

"I should return home and tell my father all that's happened. I am certain he will want to act as the second witness," James said.

Lord Robert dipped his head. "I ask that you do what you can to preserve our privacy. At least until after my sister is wed."

James Prescott pulled a face, but he nodded. "I will do all I can, and my mother will figure out something to tell our guests."

"Thank you," Lord Robert said.

"I wish…" James started.

"Me, too," Lord Robert. "Fortunately, Lord Erik is doing the right thing. It's the most ideal outcome in a less than ideal situation."

"Perhaps it would have been better if Lord Gautin left me in the snow. Would have saved everyone a lot of trouble, especially him." Violet turned away from her brother and James Prescott, a man that had been a friend of her family's for as long as she could remember.

But so had Lord Erik Gautin, and she was tired of hearing them say unkind things about Erik. Tired of them acting as if this was the worst thing that could have possibly happened to her.

Apparently, neither of them had almost frozen to death in a blizzard.

"Lady Violet," James Prescott said.

She whirled around. "Someone *shot* at me. I almost *died* in the snow and cold. The only reason I didn't is because of Lord Erik Gautin."

"Violet," her brother whispered.

"At least you've confirmed my reputation matters more than my life," she said bitterly. "And thank goodness Lord Erik is 'doing the

right thing' after saving my life. Otherwise, I can't imagine what would happen to me."

"We would have figured something out," Lord Robert promised.

Violet stared at him. "Would you have? Or would you have just wished I had never made it to the lodge? Wished I had died in the snow so you could all mourn my passing. After all, better that than me sitting alone in a hunting lodge with Lord Erik Gautin and eating dried fruit and nuts."

Robert balled his hands. "How could you think that? You're our sister. Do you know what it was like when we found the driver and he told us what had happened? How much I blamed myself when I got back to our carriage and it was empty?"

No, she couldn't. But Violet also suspected Dominic would have rather brought home her body to bury rather than face the scandal of her alone with his childhood friend. She wasn't certain if it spoke worse of her or Dominic.

"I will do what I can," James Prescott promised and bowed to them. He then hurried out of the private dining room, leaving Violet alone with her brother.

Robert said little as he waited for the innkeeper to bring in the repast Lord Erik had ordered.

Violet wasn't certain if Dominic was more upset with her or himself.

Or Lord Erik.

Not that she could change any of it.

Violet silently ate the simple but filling fare, but she couldn't hide her smile when the innkeeper brought her a mug of hot chocolate.

Robert also smiled. "I wonder what Lord Erik had to do to procure that for you."

"He wouldn't tell us if we asked," she murmured and sipped the rich brew. A look of pure pleasure stole over her face, then she shivered despite herself.

"You still look cold." Her brother added another log to the fire and draped his greatcoat over her shoulders.

Violet snuggled into it.

"At one point, I wasn't certain I was ever going to warm up," she admitted. "I was so cold. So tired. I couldn't keep my eyes open. I told Lord Erik to go on without me."

"But he didn't," Robert said.

"He carried me the rest of the way to the lodge."

Robert blew out a breath. "You sure you're all right?"

"As all right as I can be, but I'm worried for Dominic. Something is wrong. Really wrong."

Captain Robert Pemberley's lips twitched. "You're the one that was

stuck alone for three days with the most notorious rake in the ton, and you're worried about Dominic."

She lifted her slim shoulders. "Lord Erik's always been kind to me. Once he got me to the lodge, I knew I was safe. He's never been a danger to me, and I was never afraid of him."

Captain Pemberley stared down at his coffee. "He saved your life."

"He did," Violet admitted. "I wish I didn't have to repay that by forcing him to offer for me."

"He's making out well on that," Robert assured her. He stared down at his coffee. "Though Dominic was rather harsh with him."

"And I expect Dominic was no kinder to you." Violet paused. "Was Lord Erik correct when he said what happened to our carriage wasn't an accident?"

Robert winced, but nodded. "I didn't notice it right away. We were on a safe road to a friend's home. And that's not the kind of thing I specialized in during the war."

"Lord Erik did?"

Her brother tucked his chin against his chest, he but offered nothing more. There was something he wasn't telling her, but she wouldn't get it out of him in a private room at an inn.

Robert stared at the fire. "A lot has changed. When we finally got back to the carriages and learned from the driver that you'd been shot at, but that a gentleman had gotten you to safety, I expected Dominic to be angry but grateful."

"He wasn't?"

"Angry, yes. Grateful, not so much."

"He wanted me to die there?"

"I don't think that."

"Then what?" Violet asked.

Robert blew out a breath. "When we learned what had happened, I expected Dominic to march Lord Erik straight to the altar to make everything right. We've been friends with Erik all our lives. We knew he'd do the right thing with a bit of coaxing, and while he may not be what any of us wanted for you, he's better than the alternative."

"But Dominic didn't force him to marry me. It was almost as if he wanted Erik to be a rogue rather than do the honorable thing," Violet mused. "I'm not certain what to think."

"Me, either," Robert confessed.

"He's been different since Papa died," Violet said.

Robert winced. "I wasn't home. Didn't even know until after Father had been buried. But then, I wasn't home for a lot of things."

"We all understood, but Father's passing was so sudden. No one was expecting it, least of all Dominic."

"Father always seemed so much larger than life. So in control. He

was the perfect earl."

Violet stared at the fire. "Dominic took it hard, harder than the rest of us. And that was before the full weight of being an earl fell on his shoulders."

"Knowing you're going to be the earl is different from actually being it."

"Particularly as Papa passed so suddenly. But I still think there is something more going on with Dominic. Papa may have been arrogant and self-righteous, but he did it with grace. Dominic is just being an a-" Violet caught herself.

Robert chuckled. "You and Father always were too much alike. You both see people as they are, rather than as they want to be seen. Maybe that's why he worried so much about you."

"Papa worried about me?"

"More than the rest of us combined. He always knew Dominic and I would be fine. And Jackson has something magnetic about him. Doesn't matter what foolhardy venture he's undertaking. He manages to get the right people around him to make it work."

A smile curved Violet's lips. "His ventures aren't foolhardy. They're enterprising. Jackson is a visionary. Sees things the rest of us don't, and he can't figure out why we don't."

"Maybe Papa finally saw it your way. He started listening to Jackson's obsession with steel, railroads, and all things mechanical."

Violet thought of her youngest brother. His energy. His enthusiasm. There was no problem he couldn't solve. "He enjoyed his last trip to America. He should be home from India soon."

"Hopefully these are his last trips, though Mother is right to fear him marrying a foreign girl. He's spent more of his adult life outside of England than in it."

"I've never seen Boston, New York, Bombay, or any of the places he talks about."

Robert grinned and patted her hand. "And this is why Father was so worried about you. Given half a chance, you'd follow Jackson, completely ruining your chances at a good match along the way."

"But that happened anyway through no fault of mine," Violet murmured. "Seems it would have been better to at least have chosen my path, to have enjoyed the events up to my ruin. Maybe even gotten to see New York."

"I'm sorry." Robert sobered. "But at least Lord Erik is marrying you. If Dominic wouldn't have forced him to the altar, I would have."

"He's a better man than either of you give him credit for." Violet squeezed her brother's hand as she stood. "I'm tired. I'm going up to my room to rest."

Her brother stood as she did. "Of course. If there is anything you

need, anything at all, please send for me at once."

"Thank you, Robert." But the one thing Violet needed was answers, and that her brother couldn't give her.

At least Robert couldn't.

Chapter 8

Erik secured the special license and selected a beautiful ring set with a single large purple sapphire in a rose cut. It wasn't the most fashionable ring, but it was timeless. Like Violet. And he liked that it was the color of her namesake.

Foolish, maybe, but he was allowed to be.

Most expected him to be.

But at least he was on his way to securing the future and the next Earl of Marquardt. And while the circumstances were less than ideal, he was marrying a respectable young woman from a good family. That he'd been infatuated with her for half of his life was a delightful bonus. She was as passionate and responsive in the bedroom as he had hoped, so siring an heir shouldn't be an issue.

All he had left to do to be a proper Earl of Marquardt was to fully take the reins of his earldom in hand.

Erik winced at the prospect as he stared outside of his coach. He hadn't yet figured out how to take up those reins, though he hadn't really tried. But once he was married, spending time out at Hartmore would be a lot more enjoyable. Especially if he was married to Violet.

She had loved riding across his lands when they'd been children, and he knew from her brothers that she was still an avid rider when she wasn't being paraded through London ballrooms.

For her, he would figure out how to oversee an earldom. And oversee it well.

He'd even tackle learning the arcane science of accounting. Though his brother had warned otherwise, keeping books didn't seem too difficult. Erik might even be halfway good at it if he applied himself.

And he would apply himself. He didn't want to fail Lady Violet.

Erik ran a hand through his hair.

Once, he might have turned to Lord Dominic for guidance. But not anymore. Something was different with his childhood friend. That sometimes happened when men become powerful in their own right.

Erik had seen it before.

He considered Robert and Jackson. Both were brilliant in their own ways, but those ways didn't involve learning to run an earldom.

He had numerous other acquaintances, but none would take him seriously about learning to oversee the Marquardt estates.

His estates, he reminded himself.

There was someone that might take him seriously, and Lady Violet was bosom bows with his wife. But Lady Aurora was enceinte, and Duke Erembour had retreated out to his country estate with his wife.

Erik didn't have a good enough reason to bother His Grace on his own, but taking his new wife out to spend time with her friend would give him a reason. And Violet was worried about Lady Aurora. It would make Violet feel better to see that Lady Aurora was fine. More than fine.

And it would do Lady Aurora good to have the company of a friend.

It would also allow him time to talk to Duke Erembour, and the duke was brilliant at running and managing things. A duchy was nothing compared to all Duke Erembour had once overseen.

He had been a mentor to Erik during the war. Perhaps the duke would help him again.

Erik liked the idea, and he was certain that Violet would enjoy spending time with Lady Aurora.

He tapped his pocket where the marriage license sat safely tucked against him and smiled. The future was closer to what he wanted than he had thought possible.

As his coach turned down the main thoroughfare of Northford, a chill slithered down his spine. He leaned back against the squabs, but his whole body was coiled and ready to spring.

It hadn't been that long ago he'd relied on those warnings to stay alive.

After what had happened with his carriage and Lady Violet's, it was still keeping him alive.

If someone had been targeting him, they had picked the perfect bait.

Lady Violet.

Set the perfect trap.

A sparsely traveled road in the middle of an impending blizzard.

But they didn't know him well enough to know that he would have taken her and bolted from the carriages.

Or they hadn't cared, figuring he would be an easy target against the white background. Or they had assumed the blizzard would finish what their shots hadn't.

Because they hadn't known about the Prescott's hunting lodge, or if they had, they hadn't known he would head there.

By now, the people at the Prescott's house party would know he had survived. They'd also know he was marrying Lady Violet in

Northford.

Erik cursed under his breath.

Who wanted him dead? A paramour?

Doubtful. The ladies he took to his bed were all married and expected little more of him than an enjoyable night or two.

A jealous husband? Possible, he supposed, though most of the ladies turned to him because they were being ignored by their spouse. And he wasn't the only rake they were taking to their beds.

Someone that had learned about his involvement with Duke Erembour in France?

That thought curdled his stomach, and his reaction warned him it was probably the correct answer.

But who could have learned of it?

Most thought he had never seen any combat, and while they were correct to say he had never served in a battle, he had hardly spent most of his days behind a desk.

No, Duke Erembour had put Erik's particular ability to be underestimated to use.

Erik almost laughed as he remembered how it had perplexed the duke how easily people believed whatever Erik wanted them to believe. But Erik had been doing it his whole life to make Michael happy.

Duke Erembour had learned to use it well.

It had been almost more valuable than Erik's knack for solving puzzles.

But then, most people thought Erik was attractive, and few saw beneath that. Erik had always been fine with it. It meant people didn't have expectations for him that he could never meet.

Expectations like they'd heaped on Michael.

Michael had wanted to be the best Earl of Marquardt. He'd worked hard at understanding things like accounting, crop yields, and funds management. Such things shouldn't have come easy for his scoundrel of a younger brother, so Erik made certain no one knew they did.

He didn't need to know such things, after all.

Erik had originally planned to marry an heiress, settle down, and have a family. Seemed like a logical plan. And with what he'd bothered to learn, the small inheritance he'd received as a second son had done very well in the funds. He could have had a family and lived comfortably even without marrying an heiress.

Then the war had happened, and Erik had been the dutiful second son and vowed to serve England. He'd planned to serve in the traditional way until Duke Erembour had summoned him.

Erik had still served England, just in a different capacity than most suspected.

And that was okay.

No one needed to know the truth.

Was better if they didn't.

But if someone had learned the truth, and depending on who that someone was, they could very well want him dead.

Or worse.

Duke Erembour had warned Erik when he'd joined the secret unit that it was a dangerous game. One where the winner took all. Harsher than even the battlefield as there were no rules of engagement and no expectations of mercy. But England had needed men like him.

And Erik had excelled at it.

He blew out a breath and stared at the ceiling of the coach. He hated to admit that sometimes he missed it.

Only a little. He hadn't liked how many people had died because of him, or how many he'd had to kill himself.

But it had given him a purpose, and he'd been good at it.

He'd never been good at anything before.

Had never let himself be good at anything before. He was the "spare", and he'd wanted Michael to shine.

But if that's who these people were, people that wanted to kill him because of his service to Duke Erembour, he couldn't allow them near Violet. She would be the ultimate bargaining chip. And there were things he knew that he'd promised no one else ever would.

Puzzles he'd solved no one else could.

Not even Duke Erembour.

Erik rapped on the roof and redirected the driver. Time to remember the game and lose his pursuer.

~

The sun was already setting, and Lord Erik had not yet returned. Violet stared at the rapidly darkening window. Given the time of year, it wasn't all that late, but he should still have returned, particularly with the circumstances of their marriage.

Violet wondered if something had happened.

She pressed her fingertips to her eyes. She couldn't allow herself to go down such a path. There were a hundred reasons why Lord Erik might not have returned, but only one was correct. No point speculating as they would drive her mad.

Violet tided her hair and draped a warm pashmina over her shoulders. She was just about to go searching for Robert when there

was a knock at her door.

Frowning, Violet answered and discovered Dominic on the other side. He still appeared as immaculate as ever: his cravat perfectly tied, not a speck of lint on his coat, and his Hessians polished to a high shine.

But his hair appeared slightly mussed.

He'd either had a secret rendezvous or he'd run his fingers through it.

Violet dipped a shallow curtsey. "It's good to see you, brother."

"How are you feeling?"

"Truth be told, famished."

A hint of a smile quirked his lips. Despite her petite size, Violet had always had an appetite in line with her brothers. Perhaps because she spent so much time trying to keep up with them. Something else she would miss.

"Mother will be here in the morning."

Violet winced. Her mother had wanted a grand and elaborate wedding for her only daughter. Circumstances had deprived her of it. Though Violet herself had no hand in those circumstances, she still regretted not being able to give her mother what she wished.

Dominic scowled, a look that might have terrified her if Violet hadn't been on the receiving end of it most of her life.

"Are you certain about this?" Dominic asked.

Violet knew he meant marrying Lord Erik. "What are my other choices? Be packed off to a convent? Pray you can find a gentleman thrice my age that will accept damaged-"

"You are not damaged!"

"That's not how society sees it." Violet tugged her brother into her room and closed the behind them.

She'd known Dominic her whole life, and while there were many things about him that confused or infuriated her, she did understand him better than most.

And he was as angry at himself for not protecting her as he was at Lord Erik for rescuing her.

"Violet, he's a rogue, and a rake, and a… spy."

She blinked. "He's working for the French?"

"No."

"You're talking about what he did during the war?" And suddenly the way he was behaving at the lodge made a lot more sense. "I thought he served in an administrative capacity figuring out supply lines and the like."

"So does most of England," Dominic growled. "But he didn't. Not that any of us should be surprised."

"He was always good at those silly puzzles," Violet mused. "I could

see someone knowing how to put that to use. And he has always been far more intelligent than he lets on. I figured he hid his brilliance for Michael."

"Violet, do you know what he did? The lies he told? The men he killed in cold blood? He is not who you think he is."

She held up her hand to stop her brother's tirade. "He's the kind of man who carried me through a blizzard to keep me from freezing to death. And men like him helped win the war and keep Robert alive. I'm not so foolish as to hold that against Lord Erik, and neither are you."

Dominic blew out a breath, and while his posture remained perfect, he sagged. He was still her brother, and he was less than a decade older than her. He was desperately trying to fill their father's shoes, to be the head of the household, to be the Earl of Northwick, even though he was still a young man.

"I'm worried about you," Dominic said.

"Me, too," Violet confessed. "But I knew I'd marry one day, and we both know Lord Erik. He's a decent man."

"He's a rake!"

She lifted her slim shoulders. "And how many gentlemen maintain a mistress or two? How many are less forthright about taking the occasional lover? Or worse yet, dallying with staff who may not be able to refuse them for fear of losing their position?"

"You're not supposed to know about any of that," Dominic growled.

"I have eyes and ears, Dominic. Impossible to miss everything happening in London's ballrooms."

"Robert and I didn't do a good enough job protecting you."

"I didn't make it easy," Violet admitted. "I always wanted to know more than I was allowed. But I followed the rules. This isn't my fault or Lord Erik's."

"He's not what he seems."

"Who is?" Violet took her brother's hand. "He's a friend of yours and Robert's. That makes this harder in some ways and easier in others."

"I'm not certain he didn't arrange this whole thing."

Violet narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Doesn't matter. Your mind is made up, and you're not wrong. After this, it would be almost impossible for you to marry at all, much less well. You will have a place in society, and as an earl's wife no less."

The bitterness in his voice surprised Violet, but before she could question him further, he turned from her and left her alone with her thoughts.

Chapter 9

It was later than Erik had planned when he finally arrived at the inn. Someone had been following him, and whoever it had been was tenacious and skilled. Erik hadn't encountered someone like it since his time in France.

That worried him, particularly after the disappearance of three soldiers from Duke Aegir's regiment. Erik hadn't been a part of that regiment, either officially or unofficially, but he'd worked with the duke on occasion.

Erik may be paranoid, but paranoia had saved him more than once.

And now he had someone to protect.

It was the same game all over again, but with much higher stakes. Stakes he wasn't willing to play for. He hadn't minded risking his own life, but he would not risk Violet's.

And while Erik had been good at the game, he had always known what it was. And that had set his strategy in motion. A giant puzzle to solve.

A risky puzzle, to be sure, but still a puzzle.

He'd been out of the game for more than a year. Since he'd been called home when Michael had died.

Since he'd been handed the reins of the earldom.

And started learning the secret code of accounting. The puzzles of trade and shipping routes, only this time for household goods. Importing coffee and tea was not as easy as everyone thought, and there was a lot of profit to be had from a well-managed shipment.

Then there were the puzzles of rail lines. He was working with Duke Erembour on those. Where to place them. How they would be built. What would be required to build them.

A giant puzzle.

That was rather fun to solve.

A puzzle that would also help England when solved, just in a different way. And once solved, it would make the earldom all the wealthier.

And he had a wife to care for now. Wealth suddenly meant a great

deal more to him. He wanted to be certain that she would want for nothing. That any children they had would be well cared for, even if they were good-for-nothings like him.

But then Lady Violet would be their mother.

There was no way they would be good-for-nothings.

Still, he wasn't certain what he faced. And if someone was trying to kill him because of his time in France, he wouldn't be their only target. He needed to get word to Duke Erembour. The duke would know what needed to be done, and Erik would carry it out.

Like he always had.

Some tasks the duke had given him had been unpleasant, and some still haunted his nightmares, but Erik never doubted what he had done benefitted England and the war effort. Saved English lives and helped them win the war.

Tasks he would do again to end this threat.

Erik wouldn't run. He wouldn't hide.

That only worked for so long.

Against men like this, he had to stand and fight.

It's why he was so good with sword and pistol. He had stood and fought more than once, much to the surprise of the French. And it had stayed a surprise because he hadn't lost.

Erik tapped his pocket where the purple sapphire nestled.

He wouldn't lose now, either, not when there was so much more depending on him.

He swallowed at the thought.

Someone depended on him again. After more than a year of being on his own, it was strange, but it was also right. And he would not let her down. Now or ever.

Affixing his charming if vacant smile, Lord Erik Gautin strolled into the inn and requested after his fiancée. The innkeeper led him to a private dining chamber that she shared with her brother, Captain Pemberley.

Erik was aware of the dangerous missions the young captain had been sent on and the horrors that had gone along with them. It had been one of the hardest parts of working with Duke Erembour.

Some puzzles he'd solved had used names he knew.

Erik bowed to them both.

"You have the license?" Captain Pemberley asked.

Erik withdrew it from his pocket and handed it to him. "You can keep hold of it if you like."

"No need for that." Captain Pemberley blew out a breath.

"Sorry it took so long. Roads were bad, and I stopped to get this." Erik withdrew the ring from his pocket and knelt before Lady Violet in a silly if gallant gesture.

She chuckled as she held out her hand to him. Erik slipped the ring on her finger, more than a little satisfied to see it on her hand.

His fiancée.

Soon to be his wife.

"I arranged for the clergyman to marry us in the morning. I figured even with the roads, your mother would be here by then. And maybe someone will have talked sense into Lord Dominic."

"Not sure anyone can do that anymore," Captain Pemberley muttered.

"I do have one request, and it is going to seem rather odd," Erik said. "So I hope you will humor me."

Lady Violet narrowed her eyes. "What is it?"

"I would like you to send a letter to Lady Aurora telling her of our wedding. But I would like you to send it tonight, and I would like you to write a paragraph of it exactly as I ask."

Lady Violet frowned. "Why…"

Captain Pemberley, however, met Erik's gaze. There was an intensity to Robert Pemberley that spoke of his time on the sea and his time fighting for king and country. While Captain Pemberley had yet to see thirty summers, he had seen far more than any man ever should.

And Erik knew most of it.

"Violet, please do as Lord Erik requests," Captain Pemberley asked gently. "When you see Lady Aurora, you can laugh about it. But for now, please just do as he requests."

Violet shook her head, but she left the dining room to fetch her stationery and quill.

Once she had left, Captain Pemberley turned back towards Erik. "We all know what happened with the carriage wasn't an accident. Was there another incident?"

Erik didn't want to worry his old friend, but he also didn't want to lie to him. "No, but I was followed."

"And you are difficult to follow. Of that, I am certain."

Erik winced, but he didn't deny it.

"You're trying to get a message to Duke Erembour, and you think whoever is following you will intercept it."

"I might be wrong," Erik said. "But Duke Erembour will know for certain. And he will reply if he gets the message. But he has to get the message. If I send him something, it will never make it there."

"But if Lady Violet sends something to Lady Aurora…"

"Correspondence between a young lady and her bosom bow right before a rushed wedding is not unusual. And we'll write the paragraph in code. Even if someone intercepts it, they won't know what they're reading."

“But Duke Erembour will, assuming he reads his wife’s correspondence?”

“Duke Erembour will understand it, and he will read it, because we’ll mark the envelope in such a way that he’ll know to read it.”

Captain Pemberley tipped his head as he regarded him. “Dominic had said you were more than any of us thought.”

Lord Erik lifted his shoulders. “I did what I had to do, just as you did.”

“You could have kept your original post. The one that kept you safely tied to an administrative position.”

“But that’s not what I had to do,” Erik murmured.

He remembered the supply line puzzles, the French ciphers he’d figured out, and the misinformation he’d helped spread.

Most thought he was a good-for-nothing. And he was. So when the information he’d passed on turned out to be only half true, the spies that had been watching him and reporting back had never suspected he’d fed them the misinformation deliberately.

They still hadn’t suspected him, even when his half-truths had led them to making choices that benefited the English forces.

Erik wasn’t the only operative, certainly, but he had played his part well. He had never let down Duke Erembour or England.

Before Captain Pemberley could say anything else, Lady Violet returned. She sat down at the table and turned her gaze up to him.

“What do you want me to say to Lady Aurora?”

“Start the letter as you normally would. I will add a paragraph in the middle.”

“This is rather odd,” Violet commented, but she wrote the letter to her friend.

Halfway through the letter, Erik sat beside Violet and carefully dictated what he wanted her to write, word by word.

She huffed out a breath and handed him the quill. “You could just write it.”

“But then Lady Aurora would know it wasn’t your handwriting.”

“Please, Violet,” Captain Pemberley said. “It’s odd, but please do as he asks.”

She rolled her eyes, but she completed the paragraph to his specifications. She then finished the rest of the letter.

“I’ll post that for you,” Erik said with a grin. “Least I can do after being such a pain.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but she handed him the letter. As he took the letter and sealed it in its envelope, Erik ran the lower left corner across the lip of the inkwell. Just enough to smudge a drop of ink onto the letter.

Duke Erembour’s butler would know what it meant and deliver it

to the duke.

Erik just had to wait to hear back. And he would hear back. Of that, Erik was certain.

Violet stared down at the ring he'd given her, and his smile widened.

"You may have strange requests," she murmured, "but your taste in jewelry is remarkable."

"So is my taste in brides," he promised.

Violet stared up at him. "I wish you meant it."

"Never, ever doubt it." His tone turned more serious than he had meant it to, and he smoothed it over with a rakish grin. "Anything else I can do to make tomorrow special?"

She arched a haughty brow. "Live up to a quarter of your reputation."

Captain Pemberley cleared his throat.

Lord Erik grinned at his soon-to-be wife. He was a good-for-nothing, but he was a lucky good-for-nothing.

And he might even deserve her one day.

Chapter 10

Violet glanced over at Robert as he accompanied her up the stairs to her room.

"Something is going on. What is it? Dominic let slip what Erik did in the war. And then Erik wanted me to write a letter to Lady Aurora. That paragraph wasn't meant for her, was it?"

"Direct as ever," Captain Pemberley muttered.

"And if I wasn't, I would never learn anything from you, Jackson, or Dominic."

"You could just let us protect you."

"Or you could teach me to protect myself so I wouldn't worry so much," Violet countered.

"I taught you to shoot a pistol. Dominic still hasn't forgiven me for that."

"But it was about the only thing that kept us both sane when you had to leave me on the side of the road while you went and got help. You knew the pistol was under the seat, and I knew how to use it."

Robert tipped his head back. "Lord Erik is going to have his hands full with you."

"You assume he's going to be home long enough to bother."

"Don't assume he won't. A lot of people underestimate him. Believe what he wants them to believe. Don't let his wife be one of them."

Violet pulled her pashmina tighter around herself. "Why do you think that is? Why does he play the part of the fool? Do you think it was because of Michael?"

"Maybe." Robert lifted his shoulders. "Or maybe it's just easier."

"Do you really think that's it?"

"No."

"Then why?" Violet asked.

"You didn't know Lord Michael very well."

"He was older even than Dominic," Violet said. "And far more arrogant. Or at least more arrogant than the old Dominic."

"Being the Earl of Marquardt meant everything to Michael," Captain Pemberley said. "It was his whole life."

“But…” Violet had learned there was always a “but”.

“I don’t like to speak ill of the dead or of my friends, but he wasn’t very good at being an earl. Lord Michael didn’t have a head for numbers, though he tried. He never figured out the intricacies of shipping or the more difficult aspects of land management. He would have been a fine earl last century.”

“But not now. And his brother was everything he wanted to be.”

Captain Pemberley lifted his shoulders. “Lord Erik is a lot like his father. Brilliant, but he never wanted anyone to know. Adds to his charm and charisma.”

“And Lord Michael hated him for it.”

“Though Michael would’ve never used those words. Erik adored Michael, and he would have done anything for him. Even pretend he wasn’t as brilliant as he was. Pretend accounting was hard, or shipping schedules were cryptic. Probably didn’t help that Erik looks so much like their father, either.”

“His father must have been extraordinarily handsome.”

“He was also a renowned rake, and their mother struggled with his proclivities. More than once, she told Erik he was just like his father, and she didn’t mean it kindly. Made it all the worse that it was her friends that taught Erik to be a rake.”

“Her friends?”

Captain Pemberley rubbed his temples. “Forget I said anything. I shouldn’t have. This whole situation has me deeply unhappy. You shouldn’t be forced to marry. I don’t know where Dominic is, but he should be here. And no one should shoot at a member of my family.”

Violet hugged her brother. Hard. “Momma always said I had to marry first so the three of you would be free to find brides. Once I’m settled, I shall help you.”

Her brother sent her a withering look. “Are you threatening me?”

“Of course not, but you will be a lot happier with a woman you love and a few children underfoot.”

He shuddered. “I’m not certain either of those is possible.”

Violet was about to ask why, and Robert stepped back to the doorway of her room.

“Good night, dearest sister. Tomorrow promises to be one of the biggest days of your life. You should rest while you can.”

She almost rolled her eyes. Instead, she kissed his cheek and retired to her room. He didn’t need to know how little sleeping she and Lord Erik Gautin had done during the nights they had been trapped alone in the cabin.

Best for all of her brothers to think that nothing happened, and she was marrying for nothing more than her reputation. Not because she could already be with Lord Erik’s child.

She pressed a hand to her stomach.

Still, she didn't regret it. Even if he didn't marry her and her family packed her off to a convent, at least she would know what all the fuss was about.

Though she still couldn't imagine being that intimate with anyone but Lord Erik.

She smiled as she remembered his strong hands on her bare skin, the way he had kissed her, how hard he had been above her and inside of her.

Violet shivered, but it wasn't from cold or revulsion.

Hoyden that she was, she wanted him again. And she would have him again on their wedding night. The idea warmed her in entirely inappropriate ways.

But Violet had to keep her heart from turning her into a fool.

She had to remember that he needed her for his heir and spare, and after that, there might not be anything more between them.

Lord Erik Gautin could very well choose a path similar to the one his father had, as many gentlemen did. Not that she knew much about his father, but there was a reason for that.

His father simply hadn't been around.

He had enjoyed the life of the ton, and while he had done his duty to the earldom, he had not been a part of his children's lives.

Violet's father had been very different.

She wondered again what type of father Erik would be. Even if he didn't want to be leg-shackled, he would still enjoy children. Particularly if he let himself.

And Violet thought he would be a lot happier if followed the Earl of Northwick's example rather than the Earl of Marquardt's.

While Violet's father would never have been as "forward" as Lady Aurora's father and given Violet control of her dowry, he had been involved in her upbringing. She had seen him most days, and he had taught her many things.

Violet smiled as she remembered spending many winter afternoons curled up in her father's studying reading while he tended to the business of the earldom.

He'd been a good man and a decent father, if a stern one.

But then he'd had a lot more to contend with than many fathers.

The earldom among them.

And her. She hadn't exactly been a sweet and demure daughter.

And the war.

A frown pinched her brow. Violet knew her father had been involved in some way with the war, though she didn't know what.

But then he hadn't wanted her to know what.

Just like her brothers, he had wanted to protect her. To shelter her.

To keep her safe from all that was dark and evil in the world.

That was his duty as the Earl of Northwick, and he never let Dominic forget it.

Perhaps that was why Dominick was acting as he was.

He could hear their father screaming at him from across the grave.

Violet winced. She could only imagine the things her father had said to her brothers, but most especially Dominic. He was the eldest, the heir, and it was up to him to oversee the others. To be the next Earl of Northwick.

Protect. Defend. Provide.

Violet blew out a breath as she lay down on the bed and hugged a pillow to her chest.

Everything had gone wrong since her father's death.

One day he had been there, and the next…

She still struggled with the excuse of a riding accident. Her father was one of the most accomplished horsemen she had ever met. He had ridden every day. And that day had been no different than the string of days before.

He had taken that mount dozens of times.

The sky had been clear, and the air cool.

Violet closed her eyes.

At least there was no grand church wedding. That would have made his loss all the more difficult. Yes, Dominic would have given her away, but it wouldn't have been the same as walking down the aisle with her father beside her.

Things would have been very different if he had lived. She would probably already be married by now. Her debut into society would have been nothing but a formality. He would have already arranged everything, making certain his only daughter had a husband that would provide for her and any children she had.

Violet blew out a breath.

At least her wedding would be a private affair rather than the event of the season her mother had planned. Not only would her father not be with her, but Violet had no desire to be put on display and stared at by half the ton.

Nor did she wish to endure the whispers, smirks, and glares from the other ladies.

Violet wondered what would have happened if her father would have been alive and the events unfolded as they had.

She would never know.

But then she doubted the events would have unfolded as they had if her father had been alive. They would have never been going to the Prescott's house party, as he would have already secured a husband for her. And if they had been traveling somewhere, it would have

been as a family. She would have had him and at least one of her brothers with her.

There would have been no need for Lord Erik to rescue her.

Violet wondered who her father would have chosen as her husband. Once, there had been whispers of her father arranging a marriage between her and Lord Michael, but that had been long ago.

Before Lord Michael and Lord Erik's father had died. Before her father had died. And before Lord Michael had died.

Violet held the pillow tighter.

So many things had changed in such a short time.

It reminded her of how precious family and friends were. How easily they could be taken from her.

Violet had no idea what the future held for her and Lord Erik, but she would enjoy the moments she was given.

Even if she later learned to regret them.

Chapter 11

Violet's maid helped her don her loveliest gown of white silk with an overlay of delicate lace. The maid then tied a sky-blue ribbon around the high waist of the dress that matched the ribbon on the puffed sleeves.

As Violet's maid pinned up her hair and slid in a jeweled comb, her mother entered the room without so much as a knock. The countess's eyes were red, and Violet saved her harsh words.

Her mother had wanted a grand wedding more than anything, and her only daughter was the one being forced into a quick marriage.

The countess stared at Violet. "You are so lovely, my dearest."

"Thank you, Momma."

"I wish…"

Violet touched her mother's hand. "Me, too."

She didn't really, but the words made her mother happy. And she would have gone through with a large wedding for her mother. But at least she was marrying Lord Erik Gautin, and that was better than the alternative after all that had happened.

"He's a rogue and a rake, though at least you will be a countess," her mother lamented.

"And I will still have you, Jackson, Robert, and… Dominic."

"That boy," her mother said fondly. "He reminds me so much of your father. Just as stubborn and just as driven."

"And just as mean to his little sister?" Violet muttered under her breath.

Her mother patted her hand. "He is struggling even more than you are. You accepted long ago that you would marry someone over whom you would have little say. Dominic thought he would have that say for you. He wanted to make certain it was a good man that would take care of you as you deserved. A man your father would approve of. Dominic is struggling now that his ability to do that has been taken away."

"I don't understand why. I'm the one that has to marry Lord Erik Gautin under less than ideal circumstances. And Lord Erik is his friend. He knows Lord Erik doesn't drink or gamble. Yes, he's a rake,

but at least half the gentlemen of the ton have mistresses. Lord Erik doesn't bother to keep one as they all come to him."

Her mother chuckled. "I suppose there is that. Might be harder on your brother as it is his friend. Harder still that he wasn't there to protect you."

"Where was he?"

"That, I don't know." Her mother frowned. "He has been rather secretive lately."

"Perhaps he has a mistress."

Her mother tapped her on the nose. "You should not know of such things. And even if he does, it would be perfectly normal for a young man his age."

But not a young lady. Violet kept that to herself. It was her wedding day, as tarnished as it was, and she didn't want to fight with her mother.

Instead, she plastered on her prettiest smile and played the part of dutiful daughter. She could give her mother what little there was of the day.

And at the end of it, she would no longer be Lady Violet Pemberley, but Lady Violet Gautin, Countess of Marquardt.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, trying to ease her queasiness.

While she had always known the day would come when she left her family and her home for her husband's, she'd expected to have more time to prepare. Violet had expected to attend the Prescott's house party, as she had so many others, and return to her family's home. Dominic would entertain any offers from potential suitors. She'd hoped he would let her have the final say over whomever he chose, but, as irritating as it was, there had been no guarantee of that.

But none of that had happened.

Instead, she had almost died on the side of the road. Been shot at. Spent a few nights with the most notorious rake in the ton. And learned how he had earned that reputation.

Everything seemed to be happening so quickly. Too quickly. She would soon be a countess with all the expectations that went with it.

Her head whirled with the changes, and a part of her couldn't quite believe they were real. A part of her still expected to return to her family's home in Mayfair as Dominic contemplated how to best arrange her future.

Which was poppycock as Dominic couldn't arrange his own, but she had known fighting that battle was futile.

And after that morning, she would no longer be Dominic's responsibility. Would no longer live in the house she had grown up in. Would no longer see her brothers every day. Or her mother.

Violet sucked in a breath and steadied herself. She'd known this

day would come, and she liked Lord Erik Gautin. A lot. Too much. Had since they were kids. Had even been planning to have an affair with him once she'd fulfilled her duties to her husband.

Because she had been infatuated with him. Maybe even in love with him. She winced at the thought, but she didn't shy away from it.

Her silly, foolish heart.

At least she already knew how enjoyable such an affair with Lord Erik was, so she didn't fear her wedding night.

And Lord Erik would protect her. Care for her. He had proven that by carrying her through a blizzard. If he would do that for her, there was little he wouldn't do.

Violet had few reasons to be nervous.

Which did absolutely nothing to console her.

Her mother fixed the last strands of Violet's hair, then Lady Northwick leaned down and kissed Violet's cheek.

"I know this is less than ideal, and I would have never chosen Lord Erik Gautin for you, but I suspect he will at least try to be good to you."

"He fears Dominic," Violet said. "At least a little."

"And he asked permission to court you once."

Violet's eyes widened, and she balled her fists at her side. Lord Erik Gautin had asked to court her, and no had ever told her? No one had even asked if it was a match she would have wanted?

Dominic had never allowed her the chance to tell him or anyone else how she felt about Lord Erik, even *after* Lord Erik had made his interest known?

She might not have wanted to allow Lord Erik to court her, even with all she felt for him, because of all she felt for him, but that should have been her decision.

If Dominic had been in the room, Violet would have hit him.

"Dominic never told you?" her mother whispered.

"My brother is devil spawn," Violet seethed. "Why would Dominic keep that from me? He's told me about every other suitor who has sought my hand. Why not Lord Erik Gautin, *Earl* of Marquardt?"

"Violet…"

"When did Lord Erik ask him?"

"I am not certain. Shortly after he returned from France, I think."

And before he had become one of the most renowned rakes in London. Violet wanted to strangle her brother. How could he have kept this from her?

Her mother frowned. "This has you really upset."

"Of course it does! It's one thing to accept that I may not have the sole choice over whom I marry, but it was Dominic's friend asking for permission to court me. And the *Earl* of Marquardt. Dominic could at

least have had the courtesy to tell me. To ask me what *I* thought. What *I* wanted."

"Perhaps he feared you would have accepted," her mother murmured.

"But Lord Erik wasn't a rogue or a rake back then." Violet tightened her fists.

Her brother may have cost her a lifetime of happiness. The chance to have had Lord Erik as the man he had been. The veteran home from a terrible war that had taken more from him than anyone would know because he didn't want them to know. Didn't want them to ever learn all he had done for king and country.

Violet would never forgive Dominic.

"Dominic was doing what he thought best," her mother said.

"I may never speak to him again," Violet snapped.

Her mother took her hands. "Please, I am certain he had a good reason. He loves you, Violet, and you're his little sister. He wants only what's best for you, and he may have suspected you still had a bit of a childhood crush on Lord Erik."

"Then why not let him court me? Let us see where it led? If all Domonic wants is wealth and connections, he could hardly do better than the Earl of Marquardt," Violet said bitterly. "But it might have been what I wanted, so I couldn't possible have it."

Her mother hugged her. "My dearest, I am certain it wasn't like that."

"And that explains why Dominic was so horrible to me. To Lord Erik. Lord Erik is marrying me even after Dominic told him he couldn't court me. So rather than seeing me safely back to the inn and making certain Lord Erik went through with the marriage, my brother had to storm off and have a tantrum."

"You and Dominic need to have a long talk."

"I need to push him off a pier into a deep lake," Violet muttered.

Her mother pursed her lips. "Whatever happened between Dominic and Lord Erik, Lord Erik has not asked to court another young lady since."

Because he had become a rake, as his father before him, and no longer needed to court young ladies. But Violet kept that to herself. She would remind Dominic of it when she pushed him into a lake.

The countess patted Violet's shoulder. "I still worry about this match, but there is nothing to be done for it. If Lord Erik is like his father, perhaps you will find comfort in friends and children."

But he wasn't his father. Why did no one else see that?

Because Erik didn't want them to see it. Because they didn't want to see it. So much easier to believe what they wished, and Erik allowed them. Because it was easier to be what they wished. At least

on the outside.

As angry as she was at Dominic for all he may have cost her, she was even angrier at him for Lord Erik's sake. That he would believe the gossips over his best friend, particularly before Lord Erik had become the rake he was.

Dominic might have been able to help his friend find happiness, especially if Dominic knew he had been a spy rather than sitting comfortably behind the front lines planning logistics.

But her brother had failed her and his best friend.

She would have a long talk with her brother while Dominic was swimming in the lake she had pushed him into.

But there would be time for that later.

Today, she had to marry her rake.

~

Erik arrived at the church early. He didn't want anyone to think he was backing out on his word to marry Lady Violet.

More than that, he didn't want to lose the opportunity to make her his wife.

He was turned out in his finest coat, buckskin britches, and perfectly tailored shirt of bath superfine. His Hessians were polished to a high shine, and his cravat was expertly tied. Even the buttons on his waistcoat gleamed.

He almost felt sorry for his valet.

Almost.

Captain Robert Pemberley and Lord Prescott arrived at the church, as did James Prescott. Erik dipped his head in greeting.

They were there to make certain that he went through with the marriage as much as to act as witnesses.

Not that there was any chance that he wasn't making Lady Violet his wife. He would've offered for her the day after her debut if Lord Dominic would've accepted his suit.

Both of his lifelong friends were somber as they joined him, and Erik allowed it. They didn't have to share in his happiness, or even know how happy he was.

If someone was trying to kill him, it might be best for Violet if no one knew how much he wanted to marry her.

As he waited for her to arrive, he surveyed the empty church.

Whoever had followed him, hadn't followed him to the church.

Either they were waiting for him elsewhere, or they hadn't yet

learned that the incident with the carriages had landed him leg-shackled.

If that were true, then they weren't a member of the ton.

Gossip flowed through the ton faster than water over a cliff. Erik was certain all of London knew of his predicament by now.

And so would Duke Erembour.

But he was not taking his new wife back to London, as so many assumed he would. His original plan had been to take her out to Hartmore to enjoy some time together as a newly married couple away from the gossips and prying eyes.

A place where they could be together, maybe even start their family together.

Hartmore had been lonely after Michael's death, but it wouldn't be once Violet was there. And once they had filled it with a half-dozen or so children.

He rubbed the back of his neck.

That meant he really needed to learn how to run an earldom. He needed to provide for that half-dozen children.

He was good with the funds and things like railroads, but he had no idea how he would handle a whole earldom. That was a lot of responsibility, and he was a good-for…

His thoughts froze as he saw Lady Violet enter the church.

Lord Dominic was beside her, and the looks she shot her brother would have frozen the Thames in July.

So Dominic was being Dominic. No surprise there. Erik was shocked he had come after everything.

But Erik barely noticed his childhood friend.

All of his attention was focused on Violet.

She was resplendent in her delicate gown. Petite, she barely came to Lord Dominic's shoulder, but Erik already knew what she felt like in his arms. What her lips felt like beneath his. And that she wouldn't break when he took her.

Quite the opposite.

She would demand more.

He shifted his position as his body responded to the entirely inappropriate thoughts.

But then, he was marrying her. She was about to be his wife. And all of those thoughts wouldn't just be appropriate, they would be expected.

As Dominic reached the end of the aisle, his hand shook as he took Violet's hand from his sleeve and laid it on Erik's. Dominik clenched his fists at his side and said nothing as he stepped back.

Erik turned Violet toward the minister. "You look lovely."

A hint of a blush stole over her cheeks. "Thank you."

He laid his other hand over hers and listened to the minister's words, words he had heard since he was a child. He said "I do" at the proper time, and so did Lady Violet. They each signed the proper documents, and so did Lord Prescott and Lord Dominic.

And they were husband and wife.

Erik couldn't suppress his grin.

He scooped Lady Violet into his arms and spun her in a circle, then he set her down and kissed her. Not the chaste kiss that would have been required if the church had been filled with spectators, but a real one.

Still, he forced himself to ease back before it became too much.

"I arranged for a breakfast to be served for the group," Erik said. "I know how much Lady Violet likes berries and clotted cream."

"How did you get berries this time of year?" Violet asked.

Erik grinned. He would do a whole lot more for her than just find berries. "And chocolate. The staff at the inn and Lord Prescott's staff were both very helpful."

And he'd known exactly who to ask at Prescott House that would be both discreet and that would help him throw together a lovely and elegant wedding breakfast on such short notice. He might be a rake, but Lord Prescott's staff adored Lady Violet and wanted something nice for her.

And, he had been extra charming.

Lady Violet stared up at him, and the smile that warmed her features made all the work worth it.

"Thank you, Lord Gautin. That was most kind."

"Anything for you, Lady Gautin." And he meant it.

Chapter 12

A surge of emotion stole through Violet as she climbed into the carriage marked with the crest of the Earl of Marquardt and neither of her brothers joined her.

Instead, she was waving to them and her mother as Lord Erik took the seat beside her.

He gave her all the time she wished to say her farewells before setting the carriage in motion.

After a few moments, they had left Northford, and she could no longer see any of her family.

She glanced up at Lord Erik Gautin.

He was her husband now. Was responsible for her.

It was a strange feeling.

Lord Erik slid an arm around her and tucked her close. Violet leaned against him and let the rich masculine scent of him fill her. She liked the way he held her, and now it was allowed. A strange giddiness filled her.

He could even kiss her, and it would be allowed. Rather than dimming her excitement, it intensified it.

"Another storm is coming," Lord Erik said.

She laid her head against him. "I wouldn't mind a few days of having you all to myself."

"We'll see if you still feel that way at the end of winter. Michael often told me I was annoying."

"Michael was an-" Violet stopped herself.

Lord Erik lifted his shoulders. "You're not the only one who thought so, but he was my brother."

"You're planning to spend the whole winter out at Hartmore?" Her insides warmed at the idea of a whole winter of him to herself. Her foolish heart was all but dancing with glee.

He paused. "Unless you don't want me there."

Violet tugged his arm tighter around her. "I look forward to it. I just didn't think you'd want to miss out on London."

"Hartmore is only boring when I have to be there by myself. And lonely. Since my mother and Michael died, it feels more like a

mausoleum than a home. Not sure it can be helped, but if anyone can fix it, you can."

He said that now, but she wondered how long until he was popping off to London.

"I also have to figure out to be an earl." Lord Erik pulled a face. "I was going to ask your brother, but he seems more upset with me than usual. Thinking maybe I should talk to Duke Erembour. Would you mind going out to visit Lady Aurora when the roads are better?"

Violet remembered wondering if the man Dominic married her off to would be so much of a tyrant that he wouldn't allow her to visit her friends. And Lord Erik was asking if she wished to visit.

"I would like to see Lady Aurora very much. Duke Erembour doesn't care for London, and with her expecting their first child, I suspect it would take more than the hounds of hell to drive him from Riverwood."

"I heard they were expecting. The gossips are quite thrilled with the whole situation. They've been calling it the tale of Beauty and the Beast."

Violet bit her lip as she wondered what they would be saying about her and Lord Erik. Best not to know. "I suppose Lady Aurora and Duke Erembour don't mind what people say. She is deliriously happy, and while I would never ascribe such an emotion to His Grace, he seems quite content with married life."

Lord Erik grinned. "I bet he is more than content. He took the post in France to escape all he felt for Lady Aurora knowing her father would have never permitted a match between them."

"How do you know? Did he tell you?"

Lord Erik lifted his shoulders. "He didn't have to tell me."

Violet wondered if there was someone that Lord Erik Gautin had pined for and had enlisted to avoid rejection.

Could it have been…

She really was going to push Dominic into a lake. A deep one. With biting fish.

"How far is it from here to Hartmore?" Violet asked as she settled against him.

"Depends on the roads, weather, and horses," Lord Erik answered. "And I have no intention of risking my lovely new bride to a snowstorm."

She smiled shyly up at him.

"There's a large coaching inn a few towns away. Figure we'll stop there for the night. The rooms are quite nice, though nothing like at Hartmore. But you'll be able to have a bath, sleep on a feather mattress, and have a delicious dinner."

And she would sleep beside him as his wife.

Violet wondered how often she would get to indulge in such a thing. She hoped it was often. She had liked falling asleep beside Erik and waking up next to him.

And she wondered what her wedding night would be like. If he would do all the wonderful things he had to her in the cabin in their wedding bed.

She hoped so.

She was growing wet between her thighs at just the memories of what they had done in the cabin.

Violet really was the kind of girl her mother had warned her about, but at least she was only that kind of girl with her husband.

Husband.

Violet stared up at the man beside her. Her husband. Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, and the man she had been infatuated with for half her life.

And she was alone with him in his coach as he took her to their home. She pressed a hand to her chest. She almost couldn't believe it.

His wife.

Everything had happened so quickly that she hadn't really had time to absorb it all.

Lord Erik smiled over at her. He then leaned forward and drew the curtains on the carriage.

As he settled back beside her, he gave her the devil's own grin. "I want to kiss you."

"Here? In the carriage?"

His grin deepened as he slid his arms around her and brushed his mouth over hers.

Violet softened against him and parted her lips, offering him all he wished.

And he took, sweeping inside of her mouth as he pressed her closer. His hands were gentle on her body as he stroked, touching, teasing.

Violet framed his face and kissed him fully, silently asking him to show her what she needed to know.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, then trailed them down her neck and across her shoulders. With a deftness her lady's maid would have envied, he had the back of her gown and stays unlaced.

He eased them and her chemise down her shoulders, revealing the firm swells of her breasts.

Cupping them, Erik thumbed over her pert nipples and drew them into hard little buds.

Violet gasped against his mouth as sensation stormed through her. No one had ever touched her like this. Well, no one other than him, but that had been in a cabin in the middle of a snowstorm.

He had also shown her the heights of pleasure that were at the end of the journey.

Still, it was hard to imagine that they could do any such things in a carriage.

But her thoughts flew apart as he leaned forward and caught one of her nipples in the scalding heat of his mouth.

Violet clung to his shoulders as desire assaulted her.

He smiled against her soft flesh, then turned to her other breast.

Violet held his head to her as she tried to absorb the onslaught of need. The wetness between her thighs increased, and she wanted him there again.

Wanted him to touch her, to take her.

He slid her onto his lap so she was straddling him even as he continued teasing her rosy peaks.

Her gown and chemise pooled around her middle, and Violet gasped as he stroked the inside of her thighs.

He then brushed over her sex, finding the little bundle of nerves and stroking.

Pleasure exploded through Violet, and she clung to his shoulders as it burned through her.

"How tender are you?" Erik asked against her breast.

"Tender?"

He smiled as he lifted his gaze to hers. "You are the first lady I've ever been with that wasn't experienced. I don't want to hurt you."

"I want you to…" Color stained her cheeks as the words eluded her.

Erik kissed her. "Me, too."

He continued to stroke between her thighs, sliding a finger into her and drawing out her pleasure until she was gasping and panting above him.

She wanted, needed him to finish all he was doing.

As if he understood, he unfastened his trousers and freed himself beneath her skirts.

Then he was lifting her and guiding her down on him.

Violet gasped and tipped her head back as he filled her impossibly full. He stretched her, adding to the heat of his touch, his kiss.

"Erik," she breathed.

He flexed his hips, filling her more as he gently guided her down to him.

It was absolutely scandalous what they were doing, yet Violet did not want Erik to stop. Quite the contrary. She wanted her husband to finish what he had started.

And Erik obliged, wrapping her in his arms as he guided her movements above him.

With her knees on the silk-covered cushions, her husband deep inside of her, and the rocking of the carriage, Violet was slightly off balance but totally under Erik's spell.

Her bare breasts brushed over the lapels of his jacket, adding an extra layer of sensation.

Then Erik slid has hand under her skirts and flicked the ball of nerves hidden in the wetness of her sex.

She clung to him and balanced herself on his shoulders.

Erik gently anchored her as he continued to thrust into her even as she ground her hips down to his.

The sensation built within her. Growing, threatening to consume her.

Then it did.

Whisking her away on the waves of completed pleasure as she slumped against her husband.

Erik hesitated, then pulled her tightly against him as he finished inside of her. He held her close as he wrapped her pashmina around her. She nuzzled against his broad chest.

"My countess," he breathed.

Violet smiled and nestled closer to him.

Chapter 13

Erik had his young bride properly dressed and curled up beside him when they entered the large coaching town.

But something was wrong.

He was certain of it.

Still, he stopped at the inn as he had planned, but rather than renting a room, he arranged to have the carriage reprovisioned and the horses changed. He would have reversed the doors on the carriage so his family's crest was on the inside if he'd had more time.

But he didn't wish to wait for it to be arranged.

Instead, Erik climbed back into the carriage and gave the driver directions for Duke Erembour's. It was neither toward London nor toward Hartmore.

It was doubtful that whoever was after him knew about his relationship with the duke. If they were planning a trap for him, that's not the direction they would search for him.

He glanced down at his wife, still resting comfortably in his arms, and he wondered if he should tell her.

No, she didn't have as much experience in these things as he did. And he wanted to protect her. If she thought something was wrong, she would appear nervous, because she would be, and that might give them away to a trained agent.

And she would ask questions. Questions he couldn't answer.

While she had a right to the truth, he would give it to her when he was certain it wouldn't endanger her. Erik felt like a cad withholding that they were in danger from her, but it was up to him to safeguard her. To protect her.

He may be a good-for-nothing, but he was a good-for-nothing that would make certain Lady Violet was protected. Her reputation, her place in society, and her life.

Knowing all that he did about the shooter and the carriages, he probably shouldn't have married her. Being with him most likely endangered her.

But he was a selfish good-for-nothing, and he would not turn up the opportunity to make the woman that had enchanted him half of

his life his wife.

And it had been the only way to save her from a worse fate.

To protect her.

After all, she had been wondering if death was better than the dishonor she would face once it got out that she had spent the night alone with him.

Though it wouldn't have mattered if she had spent the night alone with him or with a saint. Her reputation would've still been ruined.

Only thing that would have saved it would have been if one of her brothers had been there with them.

Erik still wanted to know where Lord Dominic had been.

Dominic had been planning to attend the Prescott's house party. So why hadn't he ridden there with Violet and Lord Robert? It was up to him to protect his sister, and he hadn't.

But Erik had.

As Erik had learned well from Duke Erembour, every action or inaction was a choice. Not choosing was still choosing. And not choosing could be as powerful as any other option.

Sometimes more powerful.

He'd learned a lot from Duke Erembour. While the duke wasn't much older than Erik, he had spent his life learning to run a sprawling duchy. Because his father had bothered to teach him. Because he had been needed.

Erik had always been the spare.

The good-for-nothing that had made his mother cry when he walked into a room. Not for anything he'd done, but because he resembled his father so much.

Which was strange as Erik had few memories of his father. His father had been a fashionable gentleman of London. He had overseen the financial side of the earldom, and he had left the domestic side to his countess.

Not that Erik wanted such an arrangement, but it wasn't unusual. And whatever had happened between his parents, he wasn't the one to blame.

At least he didn't think he was.

But they had both passed on, as had Michael, leaving him alone in the massive house. And Michael's death had brought him back to England early.

Even so, Duke Erembour had occasionally requested his assistance with a particularly complex puzzle.

And Erik had been more than happy to help.

As dangerous as his time working with the duke had been, and as terrified as he had been during most of it, that was also the one time in his life that he'd been useful.

Erik stared down at his wife with her head pillowed against him.

It wouldn't be the last.

He wasn't sure how to be a good husband or a good father, but he would try to be both. And that was something Duke Erembour couldn't help him with. Knowing all he did about the man, Erik guessed that marriage and fatherhood might be his greatest challenges.

Maybe Erik could figure it out and finally be able to help the duke with something.

"Something is making you smile," Violet commented.

"Wondering how His Grace is handling married life and impending fatherhood," Erik admitted. "It might be the one area I can't ask him for advice on."

"Duke Erembour?"

Erik nodded.

"Oh, he is trying to be tyrant, and Lady Aurora is having none of it." Violet poked a finger into Erik's chest. "And if you try any of that nonsense, you'll get an even worse reaction. Lady Aurora only ever dealt with her sweet brother. I had three overbearing tyrants to keep in line, Lord Dominic among them."

Erik's grin widened, and he hugged Violet close. "I would never dream of it. Okay, I might dream of it, but I would never act on it. I know better."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then chuckled. "Though, from Lady Aurora's letter's, I suspect Duke Erembour is acting from a place of love and fear."

"I can't imagine His Grace afraid of anything, but love does strange things to men."

Violet lifted her delicate shoulders. "He's in love with Lady Aurora, and she's with child. He can't forget that his own mother died having him. It broke his father."

Erik paused.

"Don't even start worrying about it. Momma isn't much bigger than I am, and she brought me and all three of my brothers into this world. Would have had even more of us if she and Papa hadn't decided four was enough."

"I'm not sure young ladies are supposed to know about that."

"Which is balderdash. Seems to me young ladies very much should know that if troubles arise, particularly the kind that could endanger their life, there are ways to still be a good wife without the risk."

He tipped his head as he considered.

"And I bet, as curious as I was and as much eavesdropping as I did, there are still a lot of things you can teach me."

His smile widened as he stared down at his wife.

He may be a good-for-nothing, but for her, he would find a way to give her the world if she wanted it.

“Let’s see if I can find a few,” he murmured as he eased her onto his lap.

Chapter 14

The sun was setting when the carriage turned into another town. The inns were much smaller than what Violet was expecting, but she wasn't unhappy about it. While the bed might not be as comfortable, she didn't plan to sleep, anyway.

She touched a hand to her hair, certain she was in disarray, though her clothes were neatly laced and in order.

Her husband was clearly very familiar with a lady's dress and how to get it on and off of her quickly.

She closed her eyes as pleasure still flowed through her veins, thick and sweet.

And, despite her tenderness, she wanted him again. Wanted his arms wrapped around her. Wanted his lips on hers as he was deep inside her.

Violet blew out a breath.

She was the kind of girl her mother had warned her about.

And while that bothered her not one whit, she was worried about how much she had enjoyed the ride with Lord Erik. How much she enjoyed his quiet wit and his sincere concern for his friends.

She was definitely in love with him.

Curse her foolish heart, and curse Dominic for stealing her chance at happiness with him. While most still thought of him as a carefree rake, Violet saw in him the young man she remembered from when they were children. The one who had always been so kind and thoughtful, even to annoying little sisters.

But he had changed. He was a rake, as his father had been before him. And he had the same charm, charisma, and good looks to make him one of the most successful rakes of the ton.

But maybe there could more between them. Simply because he looked like his father didn't mean he was his father. They might still be able to figure out a path forward, even if Dominic had made it more difficult.

She would never understand why people didn't see the man Lord Erik Gautin was. The man who allowed everyone to think less of him so they would think more of his brother. Not even Violet's father had

seen through it, and he had been considering a match between her and Lord Michael Gautin.

But he had never considered such a match with Lord Michael's younger brother. A younger brother Violet had been enamored with forever while she had mostly just tolerated Lord Michael to be polite.

She wondered how well her father had ever gotten to know Lord Erik. While Dominic had been friends with Erik as children, Erik had always been closer friends with Robert and even Jackson.

Probably because Dominic was the one of her brothers Lord Michael had liked best. And Lord Michael hadn't liked to share even friends with his younger brother.

Not that Lord Michael and Dominic had much in common, at least not back then, but Dominic was the heir. The one who had become the next Earl of Northwick. Violet had always wondered if that was why Lord Michael had chosen to be friends with him.

A foolish reason to be friends with someone, but Violet had never been fond of Lord Michael. She had let her father know that on more than one occasion.

Perhaps that's why marriage discussions had halted.

Still, Violet's father was usually a good study of a man's character. She wondered if he'd been taken in anyway by Erik's charm and ability to get everyone to underestimate him.

If her father had been fooled, it explained a lot. Had he truly known the two men, he would have liked Lord Erik much better than Lord Michael.

And it was more than Lord Erik's charm. A girl could have a conversation with Lord Erik about things other than himself, and he listened when she spoke. Neither could have been said about Lord Michael.

But then Lord Michael had been trying so hard to be something he wasn't. But something his brother was.

That couldn't have been easy.

Not that it made Violet like him anymore, but at least she understood a bit better what had driven Lord Michael Gautin.

Still, Violet had to be careful. She could like her husband, respect him, but if she loved him, she risked heartbreak. Though it was too late for that.

Foolish heart.

Granted, both liking and respecting her husband was more than she'd hoped for when she'd entered the marriage mart. That he was also attractive, skilled in the bedroom, and treated her with respect made him far more of a catch than most thought.

And there was always the chance… She shook her head. Better not to let herself stray too far down that path.

She had plenty of obligations to distract herself with once they reached Hartmore. She was a countess now, and while her mother had taught her how to oversee a great house, Violet had never done it on her own.

Fortunately, it sounded as if they would spend some time out at Hartmore. Things in the country were always more forgiving than in London. It would give her time to get her feet under herself, to learn what needed to be done, and how to do it well before all the eyes of the ton were on her.

She glanced up at her husband, who still had his arm around her and had laid his temple against the top of her head.

He wouldn't care if she made a snafu or two, and that was even if he noticed.

Violet smiled. While she knew some things about her new husband, she was learning even more. Like that he enjoyed physical contact. Whether he had a hand at her waist, an arm around her, or the way he held her close. That was something else that would spoil her if she wasn't careful.

She liked being close to him. The scent of him, crisp and fresh, surrounded her, mingling with their shared heat.

Erik brushed his lips over her forehead.

It was such a simple gesture, yet there was nothing seductive about it. Just an expression of… what? Compassion? Tenderness?

Could she ascribe either to one of London's most notorious rakes?

Certainly not.

And yet… Fiend take Dominic for not telling her that Erik had wanted to court her.

The carriage slowed, breaking her thoughts.

"Not exactly where I wanted to stay, but I don't want to risk the roads."

Violet didn't much care as long as he was beside her.

She smiled up at him. "While I wouldn't mind having you all to myself, I would rather have that out at Hartmore than in a carriage on the side of the road. We don't have to worry about freezing at Hartmore."

"We may not leave the bedroom for a week," Lord Erik threatened as he trailed kisses along the back of her neck.

"Careful, I may take you up on that."

His grin widened.

The carriage stopped, and Erik hopped out. He oversaw the horses and arranged for rooms and a meal for them.

Erik then returned and helped her down from the carriage. Laying her hand on his sleeve, he put his other hand over top of hers.

He then escorted her into the inn and up to their room, shielding

her from the eyes of those assembled in the main room with his broad shoulders. He closed and locked the door behind them.

"Something is wrong," Violet said.

Lord Erik blinked at her.

"This isn't a normal coaching inn, and we're not eating in a private dining room." She paused and narrowed her eyes as she remembered the large town they'd stopped in but had traveled through. She'd thought it was because Lord Erik was eager to get home. But now… "You're still worried about the man that shot at us, aren't you?"

He winced.

Violet wrapped her arms around her husband and laid her head on his chest. "No secrets. Please."

Erik held her close. "All right. I am worried. And the last town made me more worried. We could get a private dining room, but I would feel better up here, away from people that could see us and recognize us."

"You don't think whoever shot at us was someone being opportunistic?"

"Do you?" Erik asked.

"I've tried not to think about it."

"I've thought about it a lot. And I don't think it was a poacher, nor do I think it was a highwayman looking for a few pounds."

"Then what?"

"I don't know." Erik stared at the door of their room. "But I didn't want to worry you. It's your wedding day, and it should be a happy one. I will get you home safely."

She tightened her hold on him. "I know you will."

Erik stared down at her for a moment, then he held her closer. "I will bring up something to eat, and with luck, we will be back on the road at first light."

"What else aren't you telling me?"

He stilled beneath her.

"Now I know for sure there is something. I didn't live with three overbearing brothers, one of them being Dominic, without figuring out when overprotective males were keeping things from me."

Erik blew out a breath. "I'm not sure I am keeping anything from you. At least, nothing I can prove."

"Then how about what you suspect?"

"Let me take care of you, Violet. If I learn anything for certain, I will tell you. I promise."

She stared up into his honey-brown eyes and blew out a breath. He was just as bad as her brothers with the way he wanted to protect her, and it made her hope for things she shouldn't. Rakes weren't known to be the protective sort.

Erik was worried the attack wasn't random, and if it wasn't random, he had to be worried the culprits were still after him.

And it had to be him they were hunting. She'd been alone in the carriage for a long time before he'd arrived. A long time before they'd shot at the horses. Whoever had fired those shots had plenty of opportunity to kill her if they had wished.

But they hadn't.

Which meant they had been after him. And might still be.

But who would want Erik dead?

A jealous husband, perhaps.

Though now that Erik was married, a jealous husband might retreat. Or he might try to strike at Erik through Violet. Try to seduce her, as Erik had seduced his wife. That seemed more likely than trying to kill him on a snowy road in the middle of a blizzard.

Violet snorted at the idea of anyone luring her away from her husband. That they could hope to live up to Lord Erik Gautin in the bedroom was a fantasy of their own making.

But Violet could become the target of a jealous spouse in other ways. Not that she was as easy of target as most suspected. Having three brothers did have a few uses. And that had involved learning a handful of the more masculine arts, such as shooting a pistol, riding astride, and climbing trees.

No way she was going to be left behind while her brothers had all the fun.

But she was also dainty, as her mother had called it.

It would never matter how much she tagged along with her brothers, they had always been larger and stronger than her.

It was why she had wanted Robert to teach her to use a pistol so much and to practice with her. It was the only way she ever had a chance if someone attacked her.

Robert had thought it foolish at the time, and maybe it had been, but at least if it ever came down to it, she would not be a completely helpless damsel.

Though she prayed it never came down to it.

Chapter 15

While it was a small inn, Erik still made certain a delicious supper of roasted mutton, fresh vegetables, and candied pears was served to his wife. She deserved so much better, but Violet had never been the type to complain. Instead, she seemed quite pleased with the meal.

And that he'd remembered how much she liked candied pears.

How could he not remember something like that? It was such a small thing that made her so happy.

He then oversaw the servants carry up ewers of hot water so Violet could have a proper bath. She slipped into the tub and closed her eyes as a soft sigh escaped her.

"The warm water feels so good," she purred as she sank down into the steaming liquid.

Erik couldn't resist her siren's song. He sat beside her and rubbed her shoulders. Then he eased one of her legs out of the tub and rubbed her foot, focusing on easing the knots in her arch. She rewarded him with another soft sigh.

He grinned as he eased upward, massaging her calf and the back of her knee. He then placed that foot back in the tub and lavished a similar treatment on her other foot and calf.

Violet stared at him through half-lidded eyes, the water doing nothing to hide her delicious curves. "You're spoiling me."

"I'd like to spoil you more."

Her smile widened, and she reached for him.

Erik lifted her out of the tub. He then toweled her dry, enjoying how soft her skin was. How pink. How perfect.

Just like she was.

Violet ran her fingers through his hair, then drew him down to her. Her soft, full lips on his was the greatest aphrodisiac. While their first kisses in the cabin had warned of her inexperience, she was learning. Quickly.

Lifting her, he carried her to the bed and gently laid her down on it. She looked like a goddess spread across the coverlet. The most amazing and tempting goddess.

Erik kissed her full breasts as he stroked her pliant body, warm and soft from her bath. Despite her relative innocence, she already responded to his caresses.

As much as he wanted her then and there, Erik teased his fingertips over her soft curves. He focused on those areas that elicited little sighs and gentle moans from her.

Deepening her pleasure and his.

But she didn't lie still. Her hands stroked his shoulders, his chest, his back. She seemed to enjoy him as much as he enjoyed her.

She truly was perfect, and she was all his.

Already knowing how sensitive they were, Erik cupped her breasts, then swirled his thumb over her nipples until he brought them into taunt buds. He lowered his head and suckled, drawing first one, then the other, deep into his mouth.

She gasped and held him to her.

Erik grinned. He loved how much pleasure he could make her feel. Loved the sensation of her silken skin against him. The scent of her surrounding him.

He wanted to be inside of her again, to take her and make her his. Now and forever.

But first, he wanted her calling his name. Erik laved each of her nipples in turn as he stroked the inside of her thighs.

Violet opened for him, offering him all he wanted. Not because it was their wedding night and she had to, but because she wanted him as much as he did her.

His smile deepened. This was how it was supposed to be, and that he had it with Violet… he truly didn't deserve it. But he wasn't giving it up. Ever.

Erik stroked higher, teasing over her sex, then dipping inside.

He stroked through her wetness, allowing it to coat his fingers, then slipped inside of her. A soft gasp escaped from her, and she opened herself wider for him.

"Erik," Violet begged as she clung to his shoulders. "Please."

He kissed her, then undressed and joined her in the bed.

~

This was not the wedding night Violet had envisioned throughout her young life. She had not thought she would spend it in a small inn on the road to nowhere, all but begging her husband to take her.

As he had in the carriage.

This was far better.

She wanted Erik to fill her, to finish what he had started, and he seemed to understand.

Violet wanted him to join with her. Wanted to feel him inside of her. Above her.

Taking her. Claiming her.

Heat poured through her, and Violet's whole body ached for him. Ached for the release only he could give her.

"Erik," she breathed as he levered himself above her.

He touched her cheek. A gentle gesture, almost reverent.

How could she not fall in love with him?

Violet didn't have time to think as Erik slid between her thighs. His weight pressed her into the bed as his broad chest rubbed against her tender breasts. Some primitive part of her reveled in the feel of him above her. Knowing he was about to claim her, to fill her, to again show her the heights of pleasure.

And she gloried in him.

His broad shoulders. Wide back. Muscular chest.

She scraped her nails down his back and delighted in the low growl that escaped him.

Erik kissed her, his mouth hot and hard against hers. Despite his experience, he seemed to need her as much as she needed him.

And she needed him to finish what he'd started. To bring her the overwhelming pleasure he had shown her.

He deepened their kiss, his tongue stroking into her mouth and finding hers. Violet clung to his shoulders, giving herself over to the kiss as he guided himself along her tender slit, coating himself in her wetness.

She wanted him, but she didn't know how to tell him, so she parted herself for him.

An invitation he took.

Violet gasped as he filled her.

All of him was so large, so thick, so hot. He should split her asunder, but he didn't. It was as if she were made just for him.

Once he was seated within her, he held her close, then gently thrust deeper. As he did, he teased the tender nubbin at the apex of her sex until she was gasping with need. His name falling from her lips.

Her husband was above her, within her, filling her. She was his, but he was also hers.

He needed, wanted her as much as she did him.

Erik moved within her as he held her close. It was like he knew exactly where to touch her, exactly how to kiss her, and soon Violet

was gripping him with unrestrained need.

And he gave her all she asked. With each kiss, each thrust, each gentle touch.

Then Violet was there, wave after glorious wave of pleasure flooding through her. She clung to him as he thrust into her a final time and lost himself deep inside of her.

Erik lay down beside her and gathered her into his arms.

She grinned at him and threw her arms around him as she nestled into his embrace. Erik nuzzled her neck and hair.

"My wife," he whispered.

He was her husband and the most notorious rake in the ton. And Violet was in love with him, anyway.

~

Erik waited for his beautiful wife to fall asleep before he slipped her nightgown back on her and tugged on his own shirt and trousers. While he wanted to sleep naked beside her, he already knew he wouldn't sleep much that night.

He was too worried.

The warning in his gut told him they'd been followed. He would have kept going, but not with Violet. Not with another snowstorm looming, and this time, he didn't know of any nearby cabins that would offer them shelter.

It was one thing to risk his own life foolishly trying to escape an invisible menace. It was quite another to risk Lady Violet.

And he wouldn't risk her. Wouldn't let anything happen to her.

After having been in love with her for half of his life, she was finally his wife. Providence had smiled on him. Now he would do whatever he had to do to keep her safe.

Erik lay beside his wife, a pistol tucked on the headboard above them, a sword beside him, and two daggers in his belt.

He was least proficient with the sword, and he was still skilled with it. He'd practiced with Michael often enough, and as the second son, it was assumed he would join the military, so his parents had encouraged him to excel at both sword and pistol.

And he had.

He just hadn't expected to ever use it to protect his wife.

Erik's hands tightened at his side.

But he would. They would not take Violet from him.

He wouldn't let them.

Laying beside Violet, Erik waited. While he drifted in and out of sleep, he still listened for the approach of footsteps. He'd slept that way too many times before, and even after more than a year back in England, it was easier to do than it should have been.

The sun had long since set and the other guests had already gone to bed when footsteps creeping down the hall roused Erik to full consciousness. The cadence warned it was two men. No. Three.

He touched Violet's shoulder, waking her, then touched a finger to her lips. She blinked up at him as he slid out of bed and grabbed the pistol from above the headboard.

He stepped between her and the door.

Violet stared at him in silence, but she said nothing as she rubbed away the sleep.

His eyes were already accustomed to the darkness, and he drew the daggers from his belt. The scoundrels would be close enough to use them effectively when they first entered the room. But if there were three of them…

Erik swallowed and glanced back at his wife.

He had been less of a field operative and more focused on intelligence. Not that he hadn't done field work. He had. Plenty of it. But most of the killing had been left to others.

Most of it.

He'd hoped he'd left it behind, but he wouldn't let anyone hurt Violet.

The handle of the door turned, but the lock held fast.

The lock on the door was an easy one to pick, and whoever was on the other side must have agreed as they picked it and turned the handle.

Erik yanked open the door, taking the man on the other side off guard.

He gripped the intruder's wrist and wrenched him forward. Erik buried his dagger in the other man's gut and shoved it upward, under the man's ribcage and into his heart.

It was a move Erik had practiced thousands of times and had used only a handful.

Blood coated the floor, and the thick scent filled the air, a strange mix of copper and the sea. One Erik was far too familiar with.

The assailant cursed in French, then fell back as he clutched his chest.

The next man shoved past him, his arm raised to protect himself from a second dagger.

Erik stepped back, drew his pistol, and shot the man between the eyes.

More blood and worse spattered across him and the hall.

The second attacker slumped.

But the third was waiting with a pistol of his own drawn and aimed at Erik.

Erik said nothing.

“Step back into the room, Lord Gautin, Earl of Marquardt,” the man said, his words lightly accented.

French. Erik was certain of it.

Erik dipped his head and backed into the room, keeping himself between the man and Violet.

“The gunshot will bring people,” Erik said.

“Yes. Faster than desirable. Had you stayed in the other inn, we had made arrangements with the constable. But you knew we were there.”

Erik lifted his shoulders.

“So you are the one we seek. There was doubt,” the man said as he leveled the pistol at Erik. “Now you will tell me where Apollon sank.”

Erik frowned. “You’re going to kill me over Apollon? Why?”

“Do not play with me,” the man growled. “You can die quickly with grace or I can make you beg for death. Now, where did it sink!”

There was a scream in the hall and the running of feet.

“You could probably make me wish for death, but that requires time, and from the sounds of it, you’re out of that,” Erik said in French. “You can kill me, and I can take the secret of what happened to Apollon with me, or you can leave now before the constable arrives.”

The man glanced at the door, then back at Erik.

“You are coming with me.”

The Frenchman reached for Erik, and as he did so, a pillow whizzed past Erik and hit the attacker.

While it couldn’t have harmed the Frenchman, it did surprise him, buying Erik the moment he needed to grab the other man’s arm and point the pistol away from him and away from Violet.

The Frenchman cursed, and while he was strong, so was Erik.

And Erik was fighting for more than just his life.

He was fighting for Violet’s.

The pistol discharged, the blast filling the room, shaking the windows, and leaving Erik deafened for a moment.

The Frenchman dropped the pistol and fled, escaping before Erik could reach for his second dagger.

Erik paused a moment as he watched the man disappear down the stairs at the end of the hall. Erik was still alive, but more importantly, so was Violet.

Erik’s body went limp as all the anger and urgency drained away from him. He then turned to Violet, who was kneeling on the bed

behind him.

She flew into his arms and buried her face against his chest.

He stood there and held her as the screams grew loader around them and were joined by the pounding of feet and the rush of activity.

But Erik didn't care about any of that.

He still had Violet, and they were both still alive.

Chapter 16

Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, kept his wife close as people screamed and fled. He kept her turned away from the mess he had made with the pistol, and the moment he could, he excused them from their suite and took her down to a private dining room.

It was Violet's wedding night, and his past had ruined it. As angry as Erik was with himself, he was far angrier with the French.

Why did they care so much about the Apollon that they would send agents after him years after it had sailed? He'd thought Apollon no more than a treasure ship, but he would have to rethink that assessment.

But not now. Now he needed to protect Violet.

She was silent as the commotion filled the inn, and he kept her wrapped in his arms and in his greatcoat. He allowed several other gentlemen who had arrived to help to take over dealing with the bodies, calling the constable, and organizing the mayhem.

He could have done it, but that would have meant leaving Violet. Nothing was worth that. She needed him, and he would be there for her.

But the gentlemen on the scene had none of Duke Erembour's commanding presence, and by the time the constable arrived, the inn was quite the scene.

But Erik kept their small haven of peace, and for the moment, Violet was more than willing to stay curled up in his arms.

As the pandemonium died down and people returned to their beds, the constable finally came and joined him and Violet.

The man was little more than a country lord, and from his questions it was clear he wasn't used to dealing with anything like this.

"You are the Earl of Marquardt?" the constable asked.

"Yes, and this is my countess." Erik tucked his coat more completely around Violet. "Do you have any idea who those men were or what they wanted?"

Erik used his angry London tone, the one that made most people do exactly as he demanded.

“Looks like a botched robbery. Must’ve seen you and your young wife take rooms here and thought you would be an easy target.”

And learned otherwise, but Erik kept that to himself. Just as no one mentioned how Erik had killed one with a dagger and the other with a pistol shot directly between the eyes, though his skill with a pistol was widely known.

That was one thing he had allowed to slip on purpose.

If he ever made a mistake and entertained a woman whose husband was jealous enough to call him out, Erik wanted the gentleman in question to understand the skill he was up against.

Erik had only ever fought two duels in his life, and both of the blighters had deserved worse than the fast death he’d given them. What they had done to the young women that were supposed to be in their care…

He pushed the thought away.

Yes, he had taken their lives, but even now, he didn’t regret it. He would probably burn in Hell alongside of them for that, but he didn’t care. He still couldn’t find it in himself to regret removing two men that had hurt women like that. Women they were supposed to protect.

It had been enough to seal his reputation.

All those days practicing with Michael to help his brother get better had been worth it. At least, they had been for Erik.

“You don’t need anything more from me?” Erik asked, though it wasn’t really a question.

“Don’t believe we do.” The constable rubbed the back of his neck. “If we do…”

Erik handed him a card. “Send your inquiries to London.”

Violet lifted her head, and he stroked her arm. He would explain the ruse later. No point making it widely known they were headed for Hartmore when most thought they would be going to London.

The constable took his card. “If we find out anything more, I’ll send along word.”

Erik dipped his head, but he already knew the constable wouldn’t find anything else. Wouldn’t even really search for it. Men had tried to rob the Earl of Marquardt, so Erik had killed them. The constable was already done with it, so he would find nothing more. Not that Erik expected much else, and that was why he hadn’t told him they were French or had asked about the Apollon. The constable couldn’t or wouldn’t do anything about it, anyway.

The constable left him and Lady Violet alone in the private dining room.

“Are we going to London?” Violet whispered.

“No, but I’d rather not tell everyone where we are going. Let them figure it out.”

She nodded and pressed closer against him. Erik held her as he sent his footmen to start preparing their carriage for departure. He wanted to be gone with first light.

Even with telling the constable they were going to London and leaving with the sun, Erik wasn't certain the ruse would give them enough time to get somewhere safe.

There were two Frenchmen dead by his hand. Two Frenchmen that had been asking about Apollon. Two Frenchmen who each had the strange tattoo of a snake eating its tail.

The constable hadn't noticed it, but Erik had.

Erik knew what the snake eating its tail meant even if the constable didn't. Ouroboros. A very elite group of French soldiers that did things no one else would.

He needed to speak with Duke Erembour all the more.

Erik couldn't imagine how the French had learned about him, though they cared far more about the ship Apollon than they did him.

Not that he was going to solve anything at the moment, but he would.

Erik stared down at his wife curled up in his arms. Violet trusted him. Maybe, with time, he could even earn her love.

He held her closer as he remembered the pillow that had distracted their attacker. She had a spine of steel, and he thanked providence again for the chance to have her as his wife.

Erik ordered them breakfast as the footmen loaded their luggage back onto the carriage. Although the sun was not yet in the sky, the innkeeper provided them with a sumptuous feast.

Being the Earl of Marquardt was a pain, but it did come with a few privileges, and one of them was making sure his wife was cared for.

But Violet didn't eat much of the breakfast he'd ordered.

She nibbled a piece of toast and sipped her tea.

"Are you okay?" Erik asked her after the serving girl left them with a fresh pot of coffee. Violet wasn't shaking, not exactly, still, he worried she was in shock.

"Those weren't thieves."

"The constable seemed to think so," Erik said slowly.

"You never mentioned to the constable that they were French."

Erik lifted his shoulders. "The constable never asked."

"Erik-"

Erik laid his hand over hers. "And it's easier for him to believe what he wants to believe. It was a random attack by some thieves that followed us thinking we were an easy mark. No point trying to convince him it's anything different. Not like he can do anything about these people, anyway."

"Do you know who they are?" Violet asked.

“Not for certain, but I have a few ideas.”

Violet buried her face against his shoulder. She was shaking, and he held her close. Erik again cursed the men that had made her afraid.

“I’m scared,” she whispered. “I don’t want to lose you. Please, please be careful.”

“I will do everything I can to protect you, Lady Violet.” Erik held her close. For the first time in his life, he had something to lose.

“I don’t want to be protected. I want a life with you, and that suddenly seems dangerous.”

She wanted a life with him. Despite the circumstance, a grin stole over Erik’s face. Maybe it wouldn’t be as hard to convince her to love him as he thought. He would do anything to make that a reality. To earn a life with the woman he loved, and who loved him in return.

“Come now. I’m not that bad,” Erik said, trying to lighten her mood. Trying to make her feel better.

“You’re not bad at all. Quite the opposite.” Violet waived away her words. “The man asked you about Apollon. Do you really know anything about it?”

Erik lifted his shoulders. “A little. It was one of the ships I was tracking, but I decided the probability it was carrying anything important to the war was low. Most likely a treasure ship.”

“Treasure ship?”

“Not sure what the official word for them was, but it’s what I called them. After the Time of Troubles and during Napoleon’s rise, they looted a lot of stuff from the homes of nobles. But a lot of it wasn’t gold, so it had to be sold to be turned into currency that could fund the French wars. Believe it or not, there were a lot of people here willing to buy it.”

“But… That was blood money!”

Erik brushed his lips over her temple. “It was, but it was a good deal. The French had to unload it for a lot less than it was worth to find buyers quickly, particularly when they were at war with most of Europe. Might’ve been able to sell it to Americans, but that’s always a long shot. Old English aristocracy who could turn a small fortune into a large one by buying the treasures from the French and reselling it in a decade or two? That was a sure bet.”

Violet blew out her breath. “How many of these treasure ships were there?”

“Don’t know. I was mostly interested in the ones that were ferrying secrets or armaments. If I figured it was a treasure ship, I ignored it. That wasn’t the puzzle I was trying to solve, though I did report them to Duke Erembour. Not sure what he did with the information.”

Violet stared at him. “Which is why you wanted me to write that paragraph to him. It was some sort of puzzle he’d know how to read.”

Erik lifted his shoulders.

"What did you do in France?"

"Whatever Duke Erembour told me to do," Erik whispered. "Don't ask more than that because you really don't want to know."

Violet blew out a breath and snuggled closer to him. Erik was surprised but pleased. He'd half expected her to flee to the other side of the inn. But that wasn't Lady Violet, and it was another reason he loved her.

"Is that where we are going?" she asked. "To find Duke Erembour?"

He nodded. "And now we know this is about Apollon. It must have sunk, and someone wants it badly enough to kill for it. Maybe it wasn't a treasure ship."

"Or maybe you were right, and it was. Whoever lost it wants its cargo."

He winced. "Maybe. With the war over, a treasure ship could set up a lot of people for the rest of their lives."

Yet he doubted it. Ouroboros didn't do what they did for money. They were French to their very core and would do anything for their homeland. Including kill English nobles that had learned too much.

"But if you weren't tracking it, would you know where it went down?" Violet asked.

Erik considered a moment. "Maybe. If given access to the right information. It would be a new kind of puzzle to solve."

Violet stared up at him. "Have you ever considered making land management the greatest puzzle ever? How to get the largest return on the land under your care for the next fifty years?"

He tilted his head. "I hadn't ever thought of it like that."

"Maybe you should. Just imagine it as an assignment from Duke Erembour."

A smile tugged on his lips. "I might do just that. And there is the funds. And the shipping. And… Lots of little games."

"There's a reason my brothers said to never ever play cards with you."

Erik arched a brow. "And why is that?"

"That once you figured out the game, you always won."

"Mostly because others don't bother to figure out the game. There's always luck involved in any game, just like with figuring out which ships are carrying tea versus which are carrying gunpowder. But there are many things people don't take into consideration."

A smile tugged on Violet's lips. "Like what?"

"Well, like when playing cards, if you keep track of how many kings, queens, and jacks have been played, you know that any hand that requires one becomes easier or harder to get. You also know your

chance of what you're going to pick up next. All part of the game, but people ignore that part."

"Because they don't know how to do that," Violet said. "Not only can they not keep track of everything that has been played, but they don't understand how to use that to figure out what is coming next."

Erik lifted his shoulders. "Never thought of that. Always seemed pretty easy to me."

Violet gazed up at him, and her expression softened. "So we find Duke Erembour, figure out what is going on with Apollon, and then what?"

"If they are after it, then we figure out what happened to it first. If it sank, telling them where the treasure is might be enough for them to leave me alone."

"And if not?"

Erik frowned. He wasn't certain. He had known the risks when he had joined Duke Erembour, but he hadn't expected them to follow him home, and he especially hadn't expected them to strike after he had been home for so long.

"We solve one puzzle at a time," Erik told her.

But his mind was already working on it.

Chapter 17

The sun finally crested the horizon, and while there was a dusting of snow on the roads, the main storm had missed them. Erik wasn't certain if that was a blessing or a curse.

Had the storm not missed them, the Frenchman that had escaped wouldn't be able to get reinforcements. It would also mean that he and Violet would be trapped in the same town as the man that had tried to kill them.

Erik could do nothing about it. He had to focus on what he could control.

He loaded Violet into the carriage, tucked the warm furs around her, and placed a foot warmer at her feet.

Erik then sent the driver down a path that would take them to Duke Erembour at Riverwood rather than to Hartmore.

Erik was certain the men who wanted to know about Apollon would strike again, and Erik had to plan for it.

It was always harder to protect against an attack than to plan one, but he had a few things on his side. The Frenchman who had survived didn't know where Erik was traveling, and with two men of the Ouroboros unit dead, it was harder to follow him.

That led Erik back to why they had attacked him, and while he couldn't prove it, the voice at the back of his head warned they were the same ones who had attacked him on the side of the road.

That had used Lady Violet as bait.

He cursed them again. That they could have hurt her… But they hadn't. She was alive, safe, and with him. Best to focus on the issue at hand if he wanted to keep her that way.

Apollon.

Erik still wondered what was so special aboard it that Ouroboros agents would track him down to learn what had happened to it.

He'd thought it a treasure ship, but he didn't anymore. Still, whatever had been on board had to be important enough to come after all these years later. If the ship had been of military significance, that significance had dwindled greatly since the war.

So something else.

Something of significance they couldn't get anywhere else.

"What are you thinking about?" Lady Violet asked.

Erik was tempted to lie to her, to give her some triviality, but she would see through it and be annoyed. "Trying to figure what could have been on Apollon that they want. If it was just treasure, any of the ships that never made it back to France would do. And they wouldn't need me for that. So what's so special about Apollon?"

"Maybe it had some priceless heirloom on it."

"All the treasure ships did," Erik said.

"Maybe it was just the one they learned about."

Erik considered, but that didn't seem right, either. Not with Ouroboros. "Maybe," Erik said. "Still feeling chagrined that of all the ships I studied, it's one I thought unimportant that's got the French upset with me. It could at least have been one I ordered sunk."

"You ordered ships sunk?" Violet asked.

"Forget I said anything. I'm not supposed to talk about this at all, and I wouldn't be if someone hadn't asked about a French ship and then tried to kill me."

Violet said nothing, but she snuggled closer to him.

~

While Erik was almost certain they had been followed after they had left the inn, by late in the afternoon, he was equally certain they had lost their pursuer.

Still, he didn't ease his vigilance. He would get Lady Violet safely to Riverwood.

And that vigilance was why he noticed the strange man watching him when they stopped to change horses.

Erik paused as he gaged the stranger.

He was almost certain he had seen him somewhere before, though he wasn't certain where. Erik narrowed his eyes.

The stranger dipped his head and approached the earl, a sealed letter in his hands.

"From Duke Erembour," the man said, and handed the letter to Erik. The man then tugged his hat back down and disappeared into the crowd.

The letter had a smudge mark on the opposite corner from the spot where Erik had placed his. It was a reply. Maybe.

Erik said nothing as he opened the letter. The handwriting was Duke Erembour's, or a very well-done forgery of it. And Erik had read

enough of the duke's missives he was familiar with the duke's writing. Just as he had read enough forgeries to know what to look for.

It appeared genuine.

He read the letter, and while the words carried no more than the normal greetings and congratulations on his marriage, he had ciphered them often enough that he could read the invitation to Riverwood encoded within along with a safe place to stay on the way there.

Erik reread the letter.

The duke would know exactly how far Erik could make it in a day, and if he had his man here waiting for him, he would know that Erik could make it to the place listed before the sun set.

The strange man had already disappeared back into the crowd, but Erik wouldn't be surprised if he had seen the man before. Probably working for Duke Erembour before the duke had returned to England. Erik had heard it said that the duke had brought many of those that had worked with him in France into his employ in England.

Taking a deep breath, Erik read the letter again.

The place mentioned was a private residence rather than an inn.

The closer they got to Riverwood, the more people Duke Erembour would be acquainted with, and the duke would not have an operative staying at an inn unless there was no other choice. Erik was also certain that the people they would be staying with would be capable of defending themselves.

He and Violet just had to get there.

Erik may have slowed his pursuers by ending two of them, but he hadn't stopped them, and he had also warned them that he was a more difficult target than they had suspected.

Erik glanced back at the carriage where Violet was already seated and waiting for him.

He had to get her to safety, and Riverwood was the best chance he had of that. And now Duke Erembour knew he was coming.

It should make him feel better.

And in a way, it did. While he was worried the note wasn't genuine, there was nothing to warn him otherwise. Including the niggling in his gut that was better than anything at warning him of danger.

Sucking in a deep breath, Erik tucked the letter into his pocket, gave orders to his driver, and returned to Lady Violet.

The carriage exited the town, and they were clipping along the road when Violet turned to him. "A man gave you something."

Erik handed her the letter.

"Duke Erembour sent you congratulations on our wedding? And he sent a private messenger to deliver it?" She reread the letter twice

more, then handed it back to him. “Strange man.”

“He is a little eccentric,” Erik confessed. “But he’ll know what to do.”

Violet laid her head against him. “If you believe in him, then I do.”

Her words, so filled with simple trust, unnerved him. But Erik wouldn’t let her down. He would get them through this, and the next thing he had to do to make that happen was get them safely to Duke Erembour.

Then, he would figure out what had happened to the Apollon.

Most likely the North Sea had taken another victim. The water there could be treacherous to those not used to sailing it. The North Sea was already difficult to navigate, and that was before you considered how deep it was. The depth and all the fresh water dumping into the salt water meant there could be different currents beneath the water than at the surface.

Combine that with the generally lower wave speeds but higher amplitudes, and you needed a captain that was an expert in sailing and an expert in the North Sea. That was all the truer if you planned on slipping into and out of an unmarked port without anyone seeing you.

But Erik would save that for when he reached Duke Erembour. He was certain the duke either had records of the ships they had ignored or could acquire them.

Erik would figure out what had happened to Apollon, but more importantly, where it had happened.

Then he would deal with Ouroboros. One of their units had figured out who he was and that he could tell them about Apollon.

Ouroboros units were usually sent in triads, and he had eliminated two of the three. He needed to end the third man. It was unlikely they would consider him important enough to report back on just him. He was another loose end to tie up once they had the information they needed.

But Erik had to be certain. It was the only way to protect Lady Violet, and she deserved so much better than all that had happened.

He would figure out what happened to Apollon, then use it to lure out the French agents.

And kill them.

He winced at the thought, but he had no other choice. Duke Erembour had warned him of the game before he had agreed to play. Erik would see it through to the end.

Erik was glad for all the operative training he had received. It had saved his and Violet’s life. Though so had Violet’s quick thinking with the pillow.

He grinned down at his wife. They would make it through this.

Erik would see to it.

~

Violet blinked and forced herself awake as the carriage turned down a wooded path. A pair of massive dogs that looked more like wolves bounded through the trees towards them, and Violet suppressed a squeak as the carriage driver calmed the horses.

"What are those?" Violet asked as more dogs joined the first. They looked like the villains in a child's fairy story, and she suppressed a shudder.

"Irish wolfhounds, I think," Erik said. "Haven't seen one in a while, but Michael was an avid hunter and knew all about different dog breeds. This one was used to eradicate the wolf population in Ireland."

Violet stared out the window at the powerful beasts. "Why would anyone here need Irish wolfhounds? We don't have an issue with wolves."

Erik grinned. "They don't in Ireland, either. These dogs are the reason."

"But what are they doing *here*?" Violet asked as she rubbed her arms. It had already been a long day, and someone trying to kill her had interrupted her wedding night. She wanted to be alone and safe with her husband, neither of which seemed possible with the wolfhounds. "Better yet, what are we doing here with them?"

"Duke Erembour sent us here to spend the night. We'll make it to Riverwood tomorrow."

"Makes me wonder how Duke Erembour is acquainted with someone that keeps such beasts."

"Sometimes it's better not to know things," Erik admitted.

"There's a reason I nicknamed him Satan, and these are his Cerberus." Violet shuddered. "Good thing he loves Lady Aurora so much, otherwise, I would worry about her."

Erik hugged Violet close. "Not so sure about the duke's nickname, but Lady Aurora is the best thing that's happened to Duke Erembour since I've known him. I never would've thought it possible for the two of them to find each other. Just proves that calculating what is most likely to happen can still mean you're wrong."

Violet snuggled into her husband's arms. "I would never presume to calculate anything about His Grace, though I was trying to match Lady Aurora up with him."

"You were?"

“Partially out of self-preservation,” Violet admitted. “I didn’t want Dominic thinking he would be an excellent match for me. And partially because he was the only person who had ever flustered Lady Aurora. Ever made her feel anything more than mild interest or disinterest. As her best friend, I knew that, though I never understood why she felt it for him.”

Erik teased a finger along the back of Violet’s neck and across her shoulders, sending little shudders of excitement through her. “Does that mean I should take to flustering you more often?”

She arched a brow at him. “Who says you don’t already?”

And he did fluster her. Well, not exactly fluster. She wanted him. Wanted what they’d had in the cabin. And she would not allow some Frenchmen to take it from her or him. And if Lord Erik Gautin thought Duke Erembour could help eliminate the men that hunted them, she could easily endure his Cerberus. Which he had probably commanded to protect them.

Violet smiled. And she was looking forward to seeing Lady Aurora.

The carriage stopped before a tidy cottage nestled in the center of the woods, and Erik left the door closed as the massive dogs circled them.

A bear of a man with a shock of bright red hair rushed out of the house to greet them. The dogs parted for him, and their tails started wagging.

“Yer lordship,” the man said as he opened the carriage door and blundered through a bow. “His Grace said to be expectin’ ye.”

“We appreciate your hospitality.” Erik stepped down from the carriage, but his gaze strayed to the dogs.

“Ach, don’t mind them none. They be His Grace’s wolfhounds, and I give ‘em run of the lands. As long as yer welcomed here properly, they won’t bother ye none.”

Erik dipped his head and relaxed a little.

After the happenings at the inn, Violet understood why Duke Erembour would have them stay out here with someone that was caring for his wolfhounds. She couldn’t imagine anyone getting through the dogs to the cabin, no matter how stealthy they were. And Irish wolfhounds were clearly nothing to tangle with.

Perhaps there was some truth to Duke Erembour’s alleged Irish ancestry. Not that it mattered, but sometimes the gossips were correct.

But only sometimes.

Erik grinned and chatted with the large man, using his natural charm to have the man talking and telling him all about the animals and the lands.

“Bartholomew, did his lordship get here?” A woman built from the same hardy stock as her husband came out onto the porch as she dried

her hands on a dishcloth. She butchered a curtesy when she saw Lord Erik in all of his finery. “Welcome, yer lordship. His Grace said you’d be comin’.”

“This is my wife, Sonya,” Bartholomew said. “We’re right pleased to have you here.”

Sonya’s gaze slid to Lady Violet as Erik handed her down from the carriage. “And there’s yer pretty wife. Ignore them hounds and come on inside. Made something special for you.”

Violet grinned and followed after the woman, certain that this was going to be as much of an adventure as being trapped in the snowbound cabin was.

At least they would be safe.

Lord Erik and Bartholomew followed behind her and Sonya, and the bear of a man waved off the dogs.

“Gonna let them run tonight. If you hear barking, don’t let it worry you none. They do a right good job of protecting the property.”

“I bet they do. You really seem to know a lot about them,” Erik said, and drew the man into a conversation about the dogs.

Violet was certain her husband was purposely using his charm to get Bartholomew to talk about something he was passionate about, and it worked. Almost as if it was something Erik did often.

And maybe he did.

Violet pursed her lips. She wouldn’t have noticed two days ago, but she had underestimated Lord Erik Gautin. As most people did.

While she didn’t know all he had done in the war, Duke Erembour had made use of Erik’s talents. Had honed them. And had put them to work for England.

Violet didn’t want to know all he had done. Not because she was scared of what Erik had done, nor would knowing taint him in her estimation. More that it bothered him, and she didn’t want to cause him any pain.

Lord Erik Gautin had done what he had to do, and he had come home. For that, she was grateful.

Still, now that she had seen him kill two men with practiced ease, it made her wonder what else he’d learned in France.

Probably a lot under Duke Erembour.

But as Violet watched Lord Erik chat with Bartholomew, it reminded her his ability with people wasn’t something he’d learned while in France. Erik had always been curious about others, and he had always wanted to know more about them.

Part of his charisma was his genuine interest.

And he had always encouraged others toward the spotlight, allowing them to shine while he stood back.

Probably from a lifetime of having Lord Michael as his older

brother.

Lord Michael had wanted to be everything that Erik was, and because he hadn't been, he'd never been kind to his brother. And Erik had all but worshipped his older brother. Would have done anything for him.

For all Violet knew, Lord Michael might have been a decent person. But she had never seen it as he had been too busy trying to outshine his younger brother.

"Fresh fish for supper," Sonya said. "Her Grace sent down a few other things as well. Said you liked these sweetmeats."

Violet smiled. "That is so thoughtful of Lady Aurora. These are my favorite."

Erik let out a breath, and Violet turned to him.

"Nothing," he said. "Just nice that Lady Aurora knows you so well."

Violet waved it away. "We've been bosom bows for over ten years. Just like I know she is secretly quite fond of biscuits and is always looking for new recipes. She's even been searching for ones that are less sweet as Duke Erembour isn't a fan of sweets. How you can eat biscuits that aren't sweet, I will never understand."

Erik grinned and lifted her fingers to his lips. "I suspect Lady Aurora is as smitten with her husband as he is with her. She will find a way to create biscuits he likes."

"Oh, aye," Sonya said as she set the rough wooden table with a simple and well-prepared feast. "So glad they found each other. They make each other so happy, and His Grace really needed her."

"Did he?" Violet asked, taking a page from Erik's book and encouraging Sonya to talk.

The group sat together and shared stories. Violet and Erik told them of the happenings in London, while Sonya and Bartholomew told them all that had been happening around Riverwood. They also had lots of stories to share about the Duke of Erembour and his new duchess.

Violet loved hearing all the amusing anecdotes about Lady Aurora. She had felt a little guilty about matching her bosom bow with a man Violet herself had nicknamed Satan. The name had been in jest. Well, mostly, but Lady Aurora had loved him, anyway. Violet had seen that herself and had even been a little jealous.

Not of who her bosom bow had married, but of how much they had loved each other.

She glanced over at her own husband, and a smiled curved her lips. Despite everything, Violet had a chance at the same type of love herself.

And she wouldn't be so foolish as to squander it, even if it meant

risking heartbreak. If Lady Aurora could make loving Satan work, Violet could make loving a rake work.

Still, the stories Sonya and Bartholomew told made Violet want to see Lady Aurora even more. They had so much to catch up on, including Lady Aurora expecting her first child. Violet had sensed a hint of fear in her dearest friend's letters, and she needed to learn more.

And, of course, there was Violet's own rushed marriage to talk about.

Violet smiled. She was very much looking forward to seeing Lady Aurora again. It had been far too long since they had laughed, drunk tea, and ate sweets together.

The candles had burned low when Sonya pushed back from the table. "You two will need an early start if you'll make it to Riverwood tomorrow. Best to get some rest."

"You're right, of course," Erik said. He stood and offered Violet his arm.

She accepted, and Sonya showed them to a small room. She then wished them a good evening and left them alone.

Violet stared out the window, but she saw nothing in the long shadows. She couldn't forget all that had happened. The men that had attacked her husband would have killed him if he hadn't killed them first.

Now that it was dark, all of it seemed that much more real.

And she was terrified they would strike again, although that would be difficult with the wolfhounds patrolling the property.

Probably why Duke Erembour had sent her and Erik there.

Violet shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself.

Erik stood behind her and held her close. "It's going to be all right."

"I like Sonya and Bartholomew. I don't want to bring them trouble."

"Duke Erembour sent us here for a reason. Did you see those dogs? Only a fool would tangle with them. And we know only one man escaped. He is either out there alone searching for me, or he retreated to get reinforcements."

Violet pulled Erik's arms tighter around herself. "What do you think he did?"

Erik considered. "Best guess is if there are reinforcements, he went and got them. Otherwise, he retreated to reassess and plan his next attack. After facing me and losing two operatives, he won't make the same mistake twice. And he won't face me in a place like this where we have the advantage."

"I hope you're correct."

“I usually am, but I was wrong about Duke Erembour ever finding Lady Aurora. So I might be wrong about this, too.”

Violet grinned. “You were wrong about Duke Erembour because you believed what Duke Erembour wanted you to believe.”

“Probably. He is the one that taught me a lot of what I know, and I wasn’t that familiar with Lady Aurora. Her family and mine weren’t friends.”

“I don’t suppose her father and yours would have gotten along well.”

Erik lifted his shoulders. “I never knew my father that well. Difficult for me to say.”

Which was exactly why Lady Aurora’s father wouldn’t have liked him. “I’m looking forward to seeing Lady Aurora, and I pray Duke Erembour can help with this.”

“If anyone can, he can.” Erik touched his temple to the top of her head. “Your brother was in the navy. He might have a few ideas if His Grace doesn’t.”

“Robert? Not sure how much help he would be on something like this. He saw a lot of bad things, but nothing like this. Still, he survived and came home, though he isn’t certain what he’s going to do now that he’s home.”

“You love him and want what’s best for him. What do you think he should do?” Erik asked.

“I want him to get married, have a family of his own, and allow himself to heal and move on.”

“And he doesn’t want that?”

“I think he does,” Violet murmured. “But he doesn’t know how to get it. The nightmares are better now, but they still haven’t gone away completely.”

“They might not ever,” Erik whispered.

She turned in his arms and framed his face in her hands. She then touched her lips to his in a soft, slow kiss.

Erik gathered her to him, deepening the kiss as he touched his tongue to the seam of her lips, then dipped between them.

Violet’s eyes fluttered closed, and she leaned into the kiss, offering him as much as he would take.

And he took all that she offered as he angled his head over hers and deepened the kiss. His deft fingers worked the laces of her gown free, and he slid it down her shoulders and allowed it to pool on the floor at her feet.

Her stays and chemise soon followed until she was in nothing but her stockings and traveling boots.

Erik’s mouth never left hers as he carried her to the bed and spread her across the simple bed pane. He slipped off her boots, then eased

down her stockings, slowly brushing his fingers along the inside of her thighs as he did.

Violet was gasping and reaching for him.

Erik stripped out of his own clothes as he joined her on the bed, covering her with the heat and strength of his body.

She parted herself wider for him. Violet wanted her husband, and she gripped his broad shoulders as she urged him to take her.

But he would not be rushed.

Instead, he took his time, exploring her with his lips and fingertips until her whole body was aflame with need and his name fell from her.

Only then did he enter her, stretching and filling her.

Completing her.

"Erik," Violet breathed as she held him tightly to her.

Then he began to move within her, holding her close as he continued to touch her. To stroke her soft skin. To build her desire and his.

Her whole body responded to him. She knew where he was taking her and the pleasure that could be between them.

And Violet wanted to make him feel as amazing as she did, wanted him to know how he completed her, but her words were lost as the maelstrom of rising need consumed her.

Her whole body and mind were focused on him.

Above her. Surrounding her. Within her.

Sending her higher and higher.

Faster.

Until her whole body tightened.

And release took her.

Erik kissed her, drinking down her moans as she lost herself to the waves of pleasure.

With one final thrust, he held her tightly against him and filled her, losing himself deep inside of her.

He then lay down on the bed beside her, and Violet curled up against him. He wrapped her in his arms and brushed a kiss over her lips.

Soft, languid, and filled with satisfied desire, Violet knew she was a lucky woman. Her husband was a true gentleman, a caring partner in bed, and kind to people. All people, even those outside of the aristocracy.

Everything about him was perfect.

Except that he was a rake.

And she loved him anyway.

Chapter 18

When Violet awoke, Lord Erik was already out helping to load the carriage and seeing to the horses. He wanted to leave early that morning, but not before the sun had fully crested the horizon.

She pulled the covers up to her chin and stared at the whitewashed ceiling.

A part of her was worried that Erik was outside alone. Violet didn't want anything to happen to him. Didn't want to lose him…

She loved him, and she hoped he loved her. Hoped that her brother hadn't ruined both of their chances at happiness with each other. Even if he had delayed it.

And if Erik didn't love her as she loved him, Violet would accept the heartbreak, but she would not be bitter like his mother had been. Would not allow it to dominate her life. She wanted what Lady Aurora and Duke Erembour had, and it was possible she could have it.

But even if such things proved impossible, she could be friends with Erik. Have a respectful relationship.

And she would love her children. She would not blame them for the sins of their father. And if she ever had a son as attractive as her husband, she would protect him as she would her daughters.

Violet had heard her brothers snickering that Lord Erik's first lover had been his mother's best friend. That Lady Marquardt had pretended there was nothing unusual about her bosom bow seducing and preying on her teenage son…

Though most didn't see anything wrong with it. Probably not even Erik.

He'd been a young man, and few thought anything wrong with an older woman teaching him the ins and outs of the bedroom.

But Violet did.

It had left its mark on Erik. He hadn't been headed down the path of a rake until the ton, and that woman in particular, had shown him that's all they wanted from him.

And Erik had always been very adept at giving people what they wanted.

Probably was why he'd been such an excellent spy.

But he was home now, and the only thing Violet wanted from Erik was time with him. She was looking forward to spending the winter at Hartmore together. To learn all that could be between them.

But first, they needed to end the threat this Ouroboros group posed.

Blowing out a breath, Violet pushed herself out of bed. They needed to make it to Riverwood, talk to Duke Erembour about the ship Apollon, and get the French to leave Erik alone.

Then, she had every intention of keeping her husband all to herself for a month. And if she wasn't misreading him, she was certain he would enjoy that month as much as she did.

Violet slipped into fresh underpinnings and a new traveling dress. She left them both unlaced in the back as she brushed her hair, knowing she could not do up the laces herself.

She tied her hair into a simple knot and draped her pashmina around her shoulders. Violet was preparing to head downstairs and see where everyone was when Lord Erik returned to their room.

He laced the back of her gown twice as fast as her maid would have been able to, and he didn't remove her pashmina to do it.

Another reminder of his reputation, and that he had earned it. But she didn't care. He was hers now.

"Sonya packed us breakfast for in the carriage," Erik said. "Sun's up, and I want to make it to Riverwood as soon as we can."

"You're suddenly worried."

"We're about to leave the safety of the wolfhounds, and it's only a guess that the last assailant went to get reinforcements. And that guess is based on the assumption that there were only three agents following me. The sooner we get to Riverwood, the better I will feel."

"Will we be safe in Riverwood, or are we just bringing danger to Lady Aurora?"

"You've never seen Riverwood, have you?"

Violet shook her head.

Erik smiled. "It's less manor house and more fortress. A lot more fortress."

Violet rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. Where else would I expect Satan to live?"

"I always thought of Duke Erembour more as Hades than Satan. Not evil, exactly, but very motivated."

Violet waved it away.

Erik chuckled and offered her his arm. Violet put her hand on his sleeve, and he laid his other over top of hers. He then led her downstairs with the same grace he would if they were descending the grand staircase at the finest gala.

"Thank you for everything," Lord Erik said to their hosts.

“Always our pleasure to help His Grace any way we can,” Bartholomew said.

“I will be certain to pass it along to him.” Lord Erik dipped his head, and he guided Violet out to the coach that was already loaded and waiting for them.

They waved their farewells to Bartholomew and Sonya, and the carriage was soon rolling down the road again.

Violet glanced back toward the cottage. “They are completely loyal to Duke Erembour. They revere him.”

“It’s why he sent us there.”

“The letter he sent congratulating you on your marriage. I don’t know how, but it told you to come here, didn’t it?” Violet asked.

“A code I developed a long time ago. It’s easy to hide in regular letters. Like the one you sent to Lady Aurora. If you don’t know what to look for, it looks like any other correspondence. With how many letters we send, it’s easy to hide.”

Violet stared up at him.

Yes, her husband was brilliant.

Yet another reason she loved him.

~

The sun was setting when their carriage turned down a heavily wooded lane. But even from there, Lady Violet could see Riverwood perched atop the side of a large rocky embankment.

The massive house was as much a fortress as Lord Erik had promised. It looked far less like a country manor and far more like something out of a child’s fairy story.

The villain’s lair from a child’s fairy story.

As their carriage passed through the tree-lined drive, a shudder slid down Violet’s back. Someone was watching them.

More than one person, most likely.

“I’ve only been here once before,” Erik said beside her as his gaze was drawn to Riverwood. “It fits Duke Erembour.”

“I wonder if Lady Aurora is happy here. The Aegir estates, where she lived with her brother, were also like a castle from a story. The castle where the fairy princess lived happily-ever-after with her fairy prince. This is more like where the evil dragon lived.”

Erik chuckled. “Maybe, but she has Duke Erembour. She’s happy.”

And her friend was. Strange to think that Lady Aurora, who was so much a like a fairy-tale princess, had fallen in love with and married

the dragon.

The sensation of being watched intensified as the carriage pulled up in front of the wide steps leading into the fortress.

"Are you certain we should be here?" Violet asked as she stared up at the foreboding edifice.

"Duke Erembour invited us. And if he didn't want us here, they would have already stopped us from getting this close."

"They?"

"He employs a lot of people that served him in France," Erik said.

She visibly shuddered.

"Lady Aurora is here, and she is going to be so happy to see you. I bet she will have a lot of new biscuit recipes for you to try. Maybe some that aren't sweet."

"How can you have biscuits that aren't sweet? Those are crackers."

Erik grinned and hugged her.

Violet blew out a breath and stuffed aside her hesitation as the driver came around and opened the carriage door for them. Erik stepped down, then handed her out of the carriage. He laid her hand on his sleeve and covered it with his other one. Then he led her up to the fortress.

A butler that looked as if he had been born with a frown on his face opened the door and bowed them inside.

The moment they walked inside the stone fortress, Violet saw Lady Aurora standing beside Duke Erembour. Lady Aurora was still as golden as an angel, and the man beside her was still as dark and imposing as Satan himself.

How could her best friend have possibly fallen in love with and married the duke when she had so many choices?

Then Lady Aurora grinned and hurried over to her. The duchess embraced Violet and kissed her on each cheek.

"I am so happy to see you!"

Lady Aurora's smile brightened the whole grand entrance, and Violet couldn't help but smile at her best friend and hug her back.

Duke Erembour wasn't Satan if Lady Aurora was this happy. Not that he ever had been. Not really, or Violet would have done everything in her power to keep Lady Aurora away from him. But Duke Erembour was not a kind man or a gentle one. At least, not to anyone but his wife.

Lady Aurora had never been able to lie, not even a little, and there was no part of her happiness that was feigned. Then, Lady Aurora's brother couldn't lie either. Part of being an Aegir, Violet supposed.

That was okay. Duke Erembour could lie enough for both him and his wife. Probably enough for his brother-in-law, too.

"We have so much to talk about," Lady Aurora said. Her smile

dimmed a little. “But that will wait until after you have had a chance to rest and refresh yourselves. The trip out here isn’t easy.”

Violet ignored protocol, hugged her best friend again, and looped arms with her. “I will have plenty of time to rest later. I want to hear all about the nursery and your plans for the baby. Will you stay out here or go into London to have the little one?”

Lady Aurora glanced over her shoulder at her husband who dipped his head. Her smile widened as she led Violet deeper into the house, chatting the whole time.

Yes, this was her bosom bow. A beautiful woman who was so full of light it was hard to stand beside her sometimes. To be compared to her.

Violet was glad she was so happy. While Violet still didn’t understand what it was about Duke Erembour that Lady Aurora loved so much, it was clear she was still as in love with him as she had been the day she had married him.

Violet’s grin widened. Not only did Lady Aurora deserve all the happiness in the world, but she had saved some other poor woman from being married to the Duke of Erembour. One who wouldn’t be a quarter as happy about it as Lady Aurora was.

And Violet looked forward to hearing about everything that had been happening at Riverwood and telling her best friend about her trip to Prescott House that had ended with her married.

Chapter 19

Erik watched the ladies retreat into the house. Violet was safe. Probably safer than anywhere else in England.

Duke Erembour turned to him. “Tell me everything.”

Erik did, leaving out nothing, including his late start the morning he had been waylaid on his trip to the Prescott house party.

“May have saved your life,” Duke Erembour mused. “What do you think of the Apollon? Still a treasure ship?”

Erik lifted his shoulders. “I would have to see any additional intelligence to see if it changes my mind, but that’s still my best guess.”

“And someone figured out it was a treasure ship as well, and they discovered you were the one tracking them.” Duke Erembour narrowed his eyes.

Erik rubbed the back of his neck. “Not too many people knew I was following those ships. Only you and a few people in Whitehall.”

“Which means someone in England gave your name to the French.”

Erik grimaced. “Someone still trying to capitalize on the war, most likely. Offer the Apollon for a share of the profits.”

“Possibly, but this is Ouroboros. Come. I have maps of the area and many of the old records.”

Erik followed Duke Erembour through the massive fortress, noting a handful of familiar faces even if he didn’t have the names to go with them.

But then he’d never had their names.

That was how Duke Erembour had worked, never telling any operative more than they needed to know.

And His Grace had been the lynchpin of all of it.

An invincible force of nature. Unreachable. Untouchable.

As he was even now.

Erik glanced toward the hallway that Lady Aurora and Lady Violet had disappeared down together.

Not as unreachable as he had once been, and his enemies had known where to strike at him. Might try to strike at him there again.

Which explained the unusual number of “footmen”.

Erik wanted to be done with the past and build a future, but he would follow the duke’s lead. He would need to hire far more men to protect Hartmore, but he would talk to Duke Erembour about that later. And he was certain the duke could help with that as well.

With that thought tucked away, Erik followed Duke Erembour to a room buried in the bowels of Riverwood. The duke pulled out a detailed map of the eastern coast of England and the North Sea. He then flipped through a series of files and brought out one on the ships they had once tracked.

It was quite thick, and as Erik flipped through it, he noted that each was marked with whether they had confirmed his estimates about the ship, he had been wrong, or if they had not boarded the ship.

Erik was pleased to see he’d been wrong about very few.

“Less than one in ten,” Duke Erembour said as he followed Erik’s gaze. “You were skilled at this particular game.”

“Because you taught me.”

“No. You created the game yourself after we went through a handful of examples we had already confirmed. The rest was you.”

Erik frowned.

“Take your time. Read through the documents. We’ll talk after the ladies have retired for the evening.”

Erik stared down at the documents. “Tomorrow,” he said. “I need time.”

The duke’s lips quirked. “Take all the time you need.”

Erik nodded, then he sat down at the large table and organized the papers, noting which scenarios he had been correct on, which he hadn’t, and trying to decipher what had made him think the ship was something other than what it had been.

He wanted to be certain the Apollon was a treasure ship.

Once he’d confirmed that, he had to figure out what had happened to the Apollon and where it had happened based on the reports that Duke Erembour still had.

And he would. Lady Violet was relying on him.

~

Violet walked through the massive manor with Lady Aurora, wondering how many people had ever seen as much of Riverwood as she was seeing.

Fewer than she could count on one hand.

Violet wouldn't call the sprawling place a manor, exactly. Fortress was the correct word, yet, with Lady Aurora there it felt neither terrifying nor stifling. Violet wouldn't say it was welcoming, exactly, but Lady Aurora had been in residence for less than a year. Violet couldn't imagine what it had been like when Lady Aurora had first arrived.

Still, it was the clear the fortress and its staff welcomed the new lady of the house.

The dragon had lured back the golden princess.

"We're preparing the nursery, though I don't plan to use it right away," Aurora said as she opened the door to a room Violet suspected was very close to the duchess's suite. "I want the baby to be close to me. Baby…"

Violet hugged her dear friend. "You are going to be a terrific mother."

"Hard to believe last Christmas I was planning to spend the rest of my life as a spinster, and this Christmas I will be married and in confinement."

"You're happy, right?" Violet asked.

A beautiful smile brightened Lady Aurora's face. "I am. Seems you were correct about leg-shackling me with Satan."

Violet hugged her and laughed. "Except he doesn't look like Satan with you."

Aurora raised a brow.

"Okay, he still does, except when he looks at you. Then he looks like Satan in pain."

Lady Aurora laughed, and Violet hugged her again.

"Still, you don't look happy," Violet said. "What's wrong? You're in love with Duke Erembour. No idea how that's possible, but there it is. So something else is bothering you. Is your brother all right?"

"Lord Francis is fine." Lady Aurora smiled as she spoke of her brother. "He has been out to visit twice already."

"Your brother misses you."

"He does, and he's lonely. But he still hasn't met the right young lady."

"He will," Violet promised. "And he has to be one of the kindest men I have ever met. Whoever he falls in love with won't be able to help loving him back."

"I hope so," Lady Aurora said.

"Okay, so that is on your mind, but that's not the only thing." Violet folded her arms and gave her bosom bow the same look she did her brothers when they were withholding something from her.

And Lady Aurora was not nearly as good at resisting.

Aurora laid a hand on her stomach that showed nothing through her high-waisted gown. “Lord Kane never knew his mother because she died in childbirth.”

“And he’s terrified of losing you,” Violet said.

Lady Aurora nodded.

So the Duke of Erembour was capable of fear. Violet wasn’t certain if that made her feel better or worse.

“He doesn’t mean to, but because he’s worried, it’s infecting me.”

“He loves you,” Violet said, still in awe that the duke was capable of such emotion.

“And I love him. I don’t want to leave him.”

Violet hugged her best friend again. “He needs to stop worrying you. It’s not good for you or the baby. Right now, you should be enjoying married life and the expectation of your first child. A child I am going to help you spoil.”

“Aren’t you a little afraid?” Lady Aurora asked.

Violet shrugged. “Momma gave birth to all three of my annoying brothers and me. She and Papa had to take measures not to have any more of us after she got the little girl she wanted.”

“Hard to imagine your mother dictating anything to your father.”

“No, it’s not.” Violet laughed. “What would Duke Erembour tell you ‘no’ to if you wanted it? And he’s one of the most feared men in all of England.”

Lady Aurora’s smile deepened. “And I am stupidly in love with him.”

“As he is with you,” Violet reminded her.

Lady Aurora paused. “Will you tell me what really happened between you and Lord Erik?”

“The gossip hasn’t reached out this far?” Violet asked.

“I would rather hear it in your own words.”

Violet lifted her shoulders and told Aurora all that had happened, including spending several nights alone with Lord Erik Gautin in the hunting lodge.

Aurora tipped her head to the side as she studied Violet. “You’d planned to have an affair with him after you were married and had done your duty to your husband. He was the only one you ever mentioned such a thing about. Are you in love with him?”

Violet lifted her shoulders.

“Good. I am glad you got something better than the marriage Lord Dominic was planning for you.”

“Marrying a rake is never better than a quiet, respectable marriage.”

Lady Aurora linked arms with her. “Some would say marrying a rake is infinitely better than marrying Satan. And marrying Satan

worked out very well for me."

A smile tugged on Violet's lips despite herself. "Yes, but no one expected Satan to fall in love with the young lady sacrificed to him."

"And no one ever expects the rake to be in love with the woman he marries."

Violet sobered. "I want him to love me. I really do. But I can't expect it."

"Of course you can." Lady Aurora squeezed her arm. "You have been in love with him since I first met you. And, if I am not mistaken, he has been in love with you almost as long. I'm just not certain why he didn't offer for you."

"He may have wanted to, but Dominic…" Violet silenced herself.

Lady Aurora narrowed her eyes. "What did Dominic do?"

Violet knew better than to try to hide it from her best friend, so she told her the truth about how Dominic had refused to allow Lord Erik to court her much less offer for her. And that Dominic hadn't felt it necessary to inform his sister of it.

"I shall push him into a lake," Lady Aurora said.

"If you do that, your husband will ask why you pushed him into a lake. And as angry as I am at Dominic, I want him in one piece."

"At the very least, he only kept you two apart for a year. Perhaps providence had a hand in that snowstorm."

"Perhaps," Violet agreed. "Or perhaps Dominic is right, and Lord Erik will break my heart. Whatever the case, with luck, I will be in your predicament soon enough. Then our children can play together."

Aurora hugged her again. "I would like that. A lot. And remember that Lord Erik is not his father, even if he looks like the man. If he were, he would have never served Duke Erembour."

Violet paused. "I need to accept him for who he is."

"Of course you do. Who he *is*. Not who he wants people to think he is. He is now the Earl of Marquardt, not the amusing second son that stood in his brother's shadow so he wouldn't outshine him. I didn't know him well before he returned from France, but you did."

"His time there changed him. Made him sharper. More deadly, though he was always that. I will never forget when he called out Lord Carlisle."

"Killed him in a duel," Lady Aurora murmured. "I had heard that, though I never heard why. I suspect my brother was trying to protect me from the information."

"Mine tried to protect me, too, but I was always better at snooping than you were."

Lady Aurora smiled. "I also only had one brother, and you had three. I suspect Lord Jackson was the easiest to extract information from."

“By far,” Violet admitted. “Most gossip he found little use for and didn’t understand why I would be forbidden from hearing something so trivial. So he would tell me if I asked the right way.”

“Why did Lord Erik call out Lord Carlisle?” Lady Aurora asked.

“According to Jackson, Lord Carlisle had assaulted his niece and left her with child. She was supposedly not the only young lady he had done that to, though she is the one that took her own life because of it.”

“I… the poor girl.” Lady Aurora pressed her fingers to her lips. “She was of no relation to Lord Erik, was she?”

“A second cousin,” Violet said. “But when no one else would stand up for her, he did. Most said Lord Carlisle expected to teach the young pup a lesson. Lord Carlisle didn’t expect Erik’s skill with a pistol, nor did he think Erik was going to shoot to kill.”

Lady Aurora studied her friend. “Why do you think Lord Erik did it?”

Violet frowned and tipped her head. “At the time, I’d wondered if he’d had the affair with the young woman and was covering it up. Dead men can’t speak and all.”

“Now?”

“He probably knew her, liked her, and was furious when he heard what had happened. He acted on a young man’s zeal. Lord Erik likes women, respects them, and he never takes what they aren’t willing to give. Part of what makes him such a good rake.”

“Or what would make him such a good husband and father,” Lady Aurora offered. “I can think of no other rake that calls men out who have hurt their wards, nor can I think of another rake that served my husband in France.”

“Makes me even angrier at Dominic,” Violet said.

Lady Aurora’s tone softened. “Dominic deserves to be pushed into a lake, but he is your brother and loves you.”

“I am less certain about that these days,” Violet murmured.

“I just want you to be as happy as I am,” Lady Aurora said. “But for that to happen, you have to stop second-guessing yourself and Lord Erik. You need to give him the chance to make you happy.”

“The curse of love,” Lady Violet teased. “You want to lure everyone into your web now that you’re stuck there.”

“It is a wonderful place to be stuck,” Lady Aurora promised. “Now, for you to tell me what had brought you here instead of out to Hartmore or London. I adore having you as a guest, but this is the last place newlyweds would travel to unless the hounds of hell were chasing them.”

“Close enough,” Violet confessed, and told her bosom bow everything that had happened since her marriage to Lord Erik.

Lady Aurora listened, her lips pressed into a grim line.

"I didn't mean to worry you more," Violet said. "And I hope we didn't bring danger here."

"The defenses here are very good, and Lord Kane has been working to improve them further. You already know what transpired up to our marriage, so it's not surprising that he's taking extra precautions. Still, I can't help but wonder if the incidents are related."

"They worked together in France." Violet blew out a breath. "If they are related, there is someone here in England selling out the men who helped make victory possible."

"And doing it for their own profit." Lady Aurora narrowed her eyes. "We both learned in London's ballrooms that not all that glitters is diamonds. There's a lot of cheap paste out there."

Violet pondered her friend's words, but they would not solve it immediately. And Lady Aurora was already worried about too much.

Violet nudged her. "Have you started thinking about names?"

"We have," Lady Aurora confessed, her pretty smile again lighting her face. "I am hoping for a boy, of course, though Lord Kane says he cares little as long as both of us are healthy. He has already started laying the foundation for a trust similar to mine should we have daughters."

"I wouldn't have expected him to be so progressive."

Lady Aurora lifted her shoulders. "He says any child we have will be an Erembour. They will be unstoppable regardless of their gender."

Violet laughed. "Okay, *that* sounds like him. And there is too much truth to it."

Lady Aurora's smile brightened.

As Violet caught up more with her best friend, sharing their hopes and worries, she wondered if Lord Erik would consider doing something similar for any female children they might one day have.

With all that she had learned about him, she suspected he would be willing to at least consider the idea.

That was more than Violet could expect even from her brothers.

Erik would be a good father, if he let himself. And Violet had already promised she would make certain he did.

It would make him happy.

And her.

Lady Aurora may have fallen in love with the Duke of Erembour, but she was still a good friend. And correct far more often than Violet wanted to admit.

Chapter 20

Erik had relit two candles when Duke Erembour joined him.

"You have an answer," the duke said.

"I'm still not certain." Erik rubbed the back of his neck.

"You are as certain as you will ever be, but you dislike the answer. What is it?"

"I don't think the currents sank it. The timeframe it came in and the weather… there's no reason a halfway competent captain couldn't have gotten the Apollon in and out of port. And I think its destination was here." Erik pointed to a spot on the map. "I just can't figure out why it didn't make it back to France."

"Because Captain McGregor sank it," Duke Erembour said as he studied the map. "Impossible to know if it was before or after the ship landed, though knowing the captain, it was before. He was ruthless and efficient."

"Was?"

"He is in the process of disbanding his crew and retiring."

"I thought he was a pirate," Erik said.

"A privateer enlisted into royal service," Duke Erembour corrected. "Extremely skilled at commanding the small light ships that are so good at harrying enemy vessels."

"He reported to you?"

"Not at all, but I was aware of him and his activities. Still, I might be able to make an introduction before he completely leaves His Majesty's service."

"Do you think he will help me find Apollon?" Erik asked.

"If he can remember the Apollon, I suspect he will assist you. However, I understand there are a great many French ships at the bottom of the North Sea because of him and his crew. One in particular may not stand out to him."

Erik frowned down at the map. "I would appreciate the introduction. If he sank it, he might remember where. Maybe that will be enough…"

"If all they want is the treasure, it will be enough. But you will still need to eliminate them so they do no came after you again."

Erik closed his eyes, but nodded. He'd known it, but he had hoped there was another way. "Could Lady Violet stay with Lady Aurora while I see to this?"

"We would be honored to have her as our guest. However, I am not certain you will be able to convince her to stay. And you may wish to have the assistance of her brother, Captain Pemberley, in working with Captain McGregor. Captain Pemberley will aide in your search, and I doubt you will secure his cooperation without his sister's help."

Erik considered. "I am most concerned about keeping her safe. Though she may not be willing to stay here. And if she returned to Hartmore or London…"

"It is almost certain the dastards would be waiting for her and would use her against you. I am rather surprised they haven't tried already, though that may have to do with the circumstances around your marriage. It will take them some time to realize how easily you acquiesced to her family's demands."

Erik stared down at the maps. "It wasn't all of her family."

Duke Erembour raised a brow.

"Captain Pemberley insisted, and I would have anyway, but I think Lord Dominic would have preferred to send her to a convent."

Duke Erembour said nothing.

"He's changed a lot since becoming the earl."

"Difficult for you to lose a friend and for Lady Violet to have such strained relations with her kin," Duke Erembour said. "But I suspect it has little to do with either of you, and a great deal more to do with Lord Dominic."

"He blames me for the entire incident."

"Interesting. I did not take him for a fool." Duke Erembour narrowed his eyes. "After listening to your account of the situation, it is almost certain that the only reason you are alive is that you dallied too long in London. If not for that, you would have passed through before the snowstorm could cover your tracks, and it would have been your carriage snared by their trap."

"I wondered if they used Lady Violet to purposely lure me."

Duke Erembour shook his head. "Doubtful. Even I was uncertain of your interest in her."

"I asked Lord Dominic for permission to court her. He refused. I figured…"

Duke Erembour stilled. "You figured what?"

Erik lifted his shoulders. "Doesn't matter now."

"I will tell you what you already know once and only because you need to hear it. You were an excellent operative. One of the best. You have a sharp intellect. Not in the way of reading the Great Bard, but in the practical application of knowledge, such as how to win at cards.

Or how to figure out a ship's cargo."

"Not much use in being an earl," Erik murmured.

"I disagree. It will be of excellent use. You will be a good earl, but you will be different than other earls. That will serve you better in these changing times. More than anything, you need to stop listening to your dead brother, who I would never have recruited, and start listening to your wife, who I would have."

Erik dipped his head. The Duke of Erembour never softened his words or his message. He would have to think about all his onetime mentor said.

"In the meantime, you need to speak with your wife while I send word ahead to Captain McGregor. I suspect time will be of the essence. You must see this through before they regroup or can send word back to France. End this quickly enough, and knowledge of your involvement will die with these men."

"I will."

Duke Erembour stepped back. "I know you will."

Erik left the study and climbed the stairs to the room he had been given. Violet was already tucked beneath the covers, but she lifted her head as he entered.

"It's late," she murmured. "Did you find something?"

"I know the approximate area where the Apollon went down, and I'm pretty sure it was sunk. Duke Erembour knows a privateer that was patrolling the area during the war. Goes by Captain McGregor. He's going to put me in touch with him."

"Not much to go on," Violet whispered.

It was more than he normally had for things like this, but Erik kept that to himself.

"Do you trust this privateer?" Violet asked.

"I'd be a fool if I did, but Duke Erembour says he'll help. And he probably will. For a price."

"A portion of whatever is dredged up?" Violet asked.

"He can have all of it, and if it was a treasure ship, it'll pay well. And I'm certain that's what it was. If it was carrying secrets or armaments, both would be of little use now. But a treasure ship could see a lot of people set for the rest of their lives."

"You should talk to my brother. Robert will know if this Captain McGregor is worth his salt, and Robert sailed the North Sea and the Channel."

"I will, but I would like you to stay here while I do," Erik said. His words were soft, almost pleading. "This is going to be dangerous, and I would feel a lot better knowing you were safe here with Lady Aurora. Duke Erembour has already invited you to stay as long as you like."

Violet blew out a breath. “I make Lady Aurora happy, and he’ll do anything to keep her that way. But I worry Robert won’t take you seriously if you go to him on this without me. He’ll think it’s a goose chase, and he’ll be less inclined to help you if he thinks you’re off doing this rather than being a good husband to me.”

“I could meet with Captain McGregor without him.”

“And I worry the captain will be more pirate than privateer and kill you so he doesn’t have to share the treasure with you.”

“I don’t really want or need it, and I’m not that easy to kill,” Erik promised her.

“Won’t matter. You need someone with you, and my brother is the right man. He’ll also know people that will help.”

“If I can convince Captain Pemberley that this isn’t a goose chase.”

“If we can convince him,” Violet said. “Maybe after we get this settled and spend some time out at Hartmore, we can come back here. I would like to help Lady Aurora plan for her baby. Duke Erembour has her worried endlessly about it, and she should be excited, not scared. And you wanted his help with the earldom.”

“He tends to scare people.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think he means to scare Lady Aurora. Still, we’re going to take care of this first. I suspect these people won’t go away even if we hide here until after their baby is born.”

“Most likely not. They want the contents of Apollon, and they think I can lead them to it.”

“Because you can,” Violet said. “I always knew you were brilliant. I am learning just how brilliant.”

Erik paused as he remembered Duke Erembour’s words. “Do you mean that? I always thought of myself as a good-for-nothing that sort of got by on his charm and looks.”

“Oh, you’re that, too.” Lady Violet climbed out of bed and slipped her arms around him. “But only when you won’t let yourself be more.”

He lifted her and carried her back to the bed. “I want to be more. For you.”

Violet framed his face in her hands, then brushed her lips over his. “I want you to be more for yourself.”

It was a strange thought, and it merged with everything Duke Erembour had said to him.

Erik slipped Violet out of her clothes and stripped out of his own. He then eased her beneath him, parting her as he kissed her, stroked her, built her pleasure and his own.

Soon she was gasping, holding him to her as she offered him all she was.

And he took.

Bringing her to the heights of pleasure as he brought himself there.

By God, how much he needed her. Wanted her. Loved her.

He would do whatever it took to keep her safe, and that meant ending whoever was searching for Apollon and him.

Chapter 21

Violet and Erik packed and were ready to leave again. This time, to face the infamous privateer Captain McGregor. Violet had expected married life to be interesting, though not quite this interesting.

While weary of traveling in the coach and not at all ready to face armed attackers on their journey across England to the North Sea, Violet kept her thoughts to herself.

The last thing Lady Aurora needed was something more to worry about, and she would worry if she had any idea what Violet and Lord Erik were doing. Violet's brothers would worry if they knew what she intended, and so would her mother.

Erik was already worried, and so was Violet. But she would not let Erik face this alone. He had faced far too much alone already. It was time he had someone willing to stand beside him, and it was fitting that it was his wife.

Still, it was hard to say goodbye to Lady Aurora, particularly after such a brief visit.

"I shall see you soon," Violet promised.

Lady Aurora hugged her. "I am holding you to that promise. And we still need to help Liliana find happiness."

"I have a few ideas on that front," Violet promised. "And you must decide if you wish to have the baby out here in Riverwood or if you are coming to London. Wherever you decide, everyone will want to properly welcome the child into the world."

"All the more reason to stay here," Lady Aurora said.

"Now you're starting to sound like your husband," Violet scolded. "There are doctors that specialize in helping to bring babies into the world in London. If Duke Erembour truly is so worried, London would be a better choice."

"I hadn't thought of that," Lady Aurora said.

"And there is nothing saying that you must venture out of the fortress of a manor house His Grace has in London, either. But it would make it easier for the rest of us to call on you, including Liliana and your brother."

Lady Aurora slid a glance to the dark and imposing presence that was her husband. Yet Violet was certain if Lady Aurora wanted to go to London, they would both be in London.

"Think about it." Violet kissed her friend's cheek. "And write. Often. Every time you fret, I want you to tell me all about it, and we'll talk through it."

"Writing it down makes me feel silly."

"All the better. Then we shall laugh about it together, but you have put it down on paper. Once you do, it shall become silly instead of worrying. I would share my mother with you if I thought it would help. You do not have to go through anything alone. Now or ever."

"You know the same is true for you?" Lady Aurora asked. "You are the sister I never had and always wanted."

Violet rolled her eyes. "Tell my brothers that."

"I bet they're already missing you."

"Maybe."

Violet embraced her friend one last time, and Lord Erik finished whatever hushed conversation he'd been having with Duke Erembour.

Her husband handed her into the coach, and Violet waved to Lady Aurora. She also noticed several additional footmen joining them.

Lord Erik followed her gaze. "Duke Erembour is concerned about our safety, and I didn't bring many footmen along with me. I wasn't expecting to run into anything more difficult than a snow-covered lane."

"This is definitely not the house party at the Prescott's I was anticipating," Lady Violet murmured.

"Me, either. But while it may not be what I expected, I am not entirely unhappy with how it turned out. I just wish I would have been able to do more to salvage your reputation. Though, I have to confess, not enough so that you would have gotten out of marrying me."

Violet arched a brow at her husband as she waved goodbye to her bosom bow. "One would almost think you wanted to be leg-shackled."

He lifted his shoulders. "Do you mind so much?"

She was sharing her bed with one of the handsomest men in the ton that knew how to make her body beg for him. A man she loved. Had loved since she was a girl. No, she didn't regret for a moment that she was leg-shackled to him.

"You didn't answer," Lord Erik whispered.

"I enjoy being with you a great deal. I always have." A smile tugged on Violet's lips. "I might have suffered from youthful infatuation, and your reputation preceded you. I figured if I couldn't have you, I could be your lover after I had made a proper marriage sanctioned by Lord Dominic and produced an heir and spare."

“You wanted me that much?” His words were soft as kept his voice even, but Violet heard the tremor beneath.

“I did. I figured it was the only way…” Violet shook her head as color stole over her cheeks.

He tipped his head as he studied her. “Just youthful infatuation?”

“Maybe not so youthful,” she murmured.

Lord Erik brushed his lips over hers. “If I had known my feelings were reciprocated, I would have fought Lord Dominic with every ounce of strength I have to convince him to let me court you. Makes me even more glad that I took advantage of our time together in the cabin to convince you to marry me.”

Violet blinked up at him. “Why is that?”

“I had planned to marry in the next couple of years, even if I never found anyone else as amazing as you. Duty to the Marquardt earldom and all. I wouldn’t have been able to indulge in a liaison with you then.”

Violet’s heart pounded in her chest as his words sunk through her. “Why not?”

Lord Erik brushed a kiss over her temple. “A man can’t go back on his word, otherwise he’s worse than a good-for-nothing.”

Couldn’t go back on his word.

That meant he took their vows seriously. Meant he was as committed to being a good husband to her as she was to being a good wife to him.

And he’d admitted to being infatuated with her. Explained why he had asked Lord Dominic for permission to court her…

“You’ve never been a good-for-nothing,” Violet murmured as she held him tightly. “You may have played a part expected of you, but it was never you.”

He stilled beneath her, but he didn’t argue.

Giddiness filled her as she hugged her husband. Hard. She loved him, and now she knew they had a real chance at happiness. That she really could have everything Lady Aurora did.

And she was not letting the French take it from her.

Chapter 22

The ride across England was grueling, particularly with their added vigilance as Erik searched for hidden threats in every town.

Violet still wasn't certain if Robert had received her letter, but if he had, he would meet them in the small port village on the North Sea that Erik had chosen. Lord Erik was as certain as he could be that the French ship had tried to dock somewhere near that village, and if anything interesting had happened, even a few years back, Erik hoped the locals would want to talk about it.

And it was close to where they were meeting with Captain McGregor.

Captain McGregor.

Violet had heard whispers about the infamous privateer, mostly from Jackson. But she had dismissed them as hearsay and legend. No one could have possibly done all that he was said to have done.

But none of those stories had mentioned Satan was whispering in his ear and telling him where to find the French ships.

Now that she knew Duke Erembour's part, the stories seemed a lot more plausible.

Violet snuggled closer to her husband, and Erik wrapped her in his arms as he touched his temple to the top of her head.

She loved him, and she hoped he loved her back. She might even ask him if he did once they were safely out at Hartmore.

A stupid smile curved her lips.

She thought she knew the answer, and it warmed her up inside faster than a cup of hot chocolate.

That she could have lost all of this…

When their business with the French was over, Violet would ask her eldest brother for the truth. Dominic had been acting strangely since their father died, and it was time she learned why. And he could no longer hide behind the excuse of finding a suitable husband for her.

Violet smiled up at Lord Erik.

He was more than suitable. She was completely in love with him, and there was the chance that he was just as in love with her. More

than a chance.

Her grin widened.

Violet wanted to start her life with her husband. One free of the past. Both his service to king and country and the scandal that had forced him to marry her.

She wanted to start the life Dominic had almost taken from her.

Violet had been happier than she could remember being with Lord Erik beside her. And he had been beside her. Lord Erik Gautin, notorious rake of the ton, had slept beside her every night since they had been married.

She smiled up at her husband.

Husband.

Even after the circumstances surrounding her rushed marriage, Dominic still could have made it almost impossible for her and Lord Erik to marry in England.

Not that it would have stopped Lord Erik.

If she had asked it of him, he would have spirited her to Gretna Green for them to marry there. Dominic would have been furious, but there was nothing he could have done about it then. Nothing except withhold her dowry.

Which wouldn't have dissuaded Lord Erik one whit.

Violet paused at the thought.

She had underestimated Erik again and again.

He was the kind of man Dominic had once been, but rather than wrapping it in the haughty pretense of an earl, Lord Erik used a handsome smile and a bit of charm. Their similarities were why they had once been such great friends.

A testament to both Dominic and Erik.

Made her wonder again what had changed with her brother.

Violet glanced up at her husband who was leaning his cheek against the top of her head again. He did like to touch her. Hold her. It was the connection, she realized, a physical connection that mirrored what he felt for her.

Her chest clenched, but she didn't back away from the thought.

He was the man that had dragged her half-frozen through hip deep snow in a blizzard. The man that had protected her from the assailants in their room. And the man that listened to reason enough to let her come along with him to make certain her brother gave him the aide he needed.

No, he wasn't perfect, but he was hers.

And Lady Aurora was correct.

He wasn't his father.

Erik was his own man. And a good one.

"Something has you upset," Lord Erik said.

She shook her head. “A lot of things. Mostly Dominic.”

Lord Erik stared down at their joined fingers.

“None of this is your fault, and I don’t blame you for any of it. We promised through better and through worse, and I meant it.” Violet tugged his arm tighter around herself. “But I’m worried about Dominic. He can be arrogant, but not cruel. And it seems cruel what he tried to do to us.”

Erik let out a breath. “He’s not an amiable person.”

“But it’s more than that. Something is wrong. Really wrong.” Violet laid her head against her husband, and he stroked her hair. “It’s like he became a different person when Papa died. I understand the burden of being an earl, but some things just seem spiteful.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dominic knew I had a crush on you, but while he would entertain a suit from Lord Michael, he wouldn’t from you. At first, I thought it was because he was trying to protect me, but you have been friends with Dominic since we were children. He has to know that beneath all your London polish, you’re a good person. And he knew you served Duke Erembour.”

“You had a crush on me?” Erik asked.

Violet rolled her eyes. “Of course you didn’t hear past that.”

Erik grinned. “Do you still?”

What she felt now was far more dangerous than a crush, but she wasn’t certain she was ready to admit it to him just yet. “We’re married now. No need for a crush.”

His smile widened. “That wasn’t a ‘no’.”

Violet arched a brow at him. “And so what if I do? What would you do about it?”

“Try to live up to it.”

“And you aren’t already?” Violet asked with mock sternness.

He held her close. “Every day. And most nights, too. Those will get better once we get this whole business behind us and head out to Hartmore.”

“You could offer me a sample now,” she said as she turned her lips up to him.

He brushed his mouth over hers, drugging her with the intensity of sensation that stole her thoughts.

His hands stroked her through her gown, teasing over her breasts and taunting their pert peaks.

Before he could take it any further, however, they arrived at their destination: an inn in the small coastal village. Violet glanced outside of the carriage, and she recognized her family’s crest emblazoned on the only other carriage beside the inn.

They weren’t exactly being inconspicuous.

“Your brother is here,” Lord Erik said. “Probably figures the letter you sent him was a plea for help with me.”

Violet brushed her lips over Erik’s. “Robert knows you too well for that. He probably figured we needed help for the same reasons we were trapped alone together in the cabin.”

Erik hugged her. “I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.” She nestled into his embrace, then offered him her hand. He helped her down from the carriage and into the inn.

Captain Pemberley was seated at a large table in the corner, his back to the wall, as he nursed a pint. His eyes widened when he saw them, and he stood and joined her and Lord Erik.

There were no private rooms at the inn, but there was only one other person there at that time of day.

Seeing two new patrons, both clearly of the aristocracy, the innkeeper hurried around to see to her and Lord Erik.

Captain Pemberley dropped a coin into the man’s hand and ordered a meal and refreshment for all of them.

The innkeeper hurried off to see to his request. Violet’s brother then escorted them back to his table in the corner.

“We are attracting a lot of attention,” Lord Erik said.

“Hard not to in a place like this.” Captain Pemberley glanced around the tiny inn. “Fortunately, I have an acquaintance with a hunting lodge out here. I’m staying there, but I wouldn’t say I’ve gone unnoticed.”

“Your friend trustworthy?” Erik asked.

Captain Pemberley lifted his broad shoulders. “Enough that he was willing to loan me his lodge for what he believed was a tryst.”

Erik lifted his brows. “Careful, or you will end up with a reputation like mine.”

“Doubtful,” Captain Pemberley said dryly. “Now what brought you two here instead of enjoying your first few weeks of marriage out at Hartmore?”

Erik’s gaze drifted over to the other patron. “The delicious chowder. Heard it was some of the best around.”

Captain Pemberley opened his mouth, then dipped his head.

“What happenings have we missed since leaving the Prescott’s?” Erik asked.

Violet listened as her brother told them what little they had missed during their time traveling. Lord Erik then inquired after the game in the area, and when Captain Pemberley had little to offer on the subject, Lord Erik sounded genuinely disappointed in his lack of knowledge.

Violet said little as she listened to the gentlemen, but she sensed Erik was worried. Something about the inn wasn’t right, but she had

no idea what it was. Still, she trusted him. If there was something wrong, he would get them through it.

As he had twice already.

After they had eaten, Captain Pemberley led them back out to the carriages.

"We should ride together," Erik murmured. "Do you keep pistols in your carriage?"

Her brother shook his head. "I didn't bring them with me."

"You should always have them with you. In the meantime, we'll take my carriage."

Once they were loaded into the conveyance and heading down the road to the hunting lodge, Captain Pemberley exhaled. "Okay, what's this all about? After the way you acted in the inn, you're making me think there's truth to a jealous husband having targeted you and my sister."

"Not a jealous husband," Lord Erik said. He sucked in a breath. "You know Captain McGregor?"

"Of him, certainly. Every sailor does. He's the most notorious privateer in the North Sea."

"Notorious?" Lord Erik asked.

"Ruthless. Cunning. Almost like the devil whispers in his ear as to where to find his targets."

"More like Satan," Violet murmured to herself.

A smile tugged on Erik's lips. "Have you ever met Captain McGregor?"

Captain Pemberley shook his head. "Don't know that anyone has. He was more myth than man. Some thought it might be several captains assuming the same name given the number of French ships they credited him with sinking."

"Not possible for him to do all they said he did?" Violet asked.

"Just unlikely. Whoever he was, he must have grown up on the sea. Some thought him the illegitimate son of a nobleman with the way he had such firm command on his sailors. Part of his success came from his crew listening to him absolutely. At least if any of the stories can be believed."

"What happens to him and his crew now that the war is over?" Violet asked.

Captain Pemberley winced. "Let's hope the Crown figures that out. Last thing we want is for them to turn to piracy."

Violet pursed her lips, but she said nothing. She liked the description of this Captain McGregor less and less. She hoped Duke Erembour was correct and the privateer would help them rather than turn on them.

Erik squeezed her hand. "We still have to go through meeting with

him."

"Meeting with him?" Captain Pemberley raised a brow. "Why would you want to do that?"

Lord Erik explained what had happened at the inn and the questions the man had asked about the French ship Apollon.

Captain Pemberley leaned back against the squabs. "You think it sank."

"No other reason for them to still be looking for it. And it had to be a treasure ship. No reason for the French to be searching for a ship that was carrying secrets now that the war is over."

"Unless it isn't the French after the ship," Captain Pemberley said. "Could be that whatever was in there was payment to someone. Might not have ever reached them, but if there was something in there that could identify who the payment was meant for…"

Lord Erik winced. "That would be worth doing a lot to keep buried. Including killing English agents that could find it again."

"But only if someone were looking for it. Maybe only if someone were close to finding it," Captain Pemberley said. "From what little gossip I have heard since being in town, no unusual things have washed up on the shoreline as of late. And it sounds like both you and Duke Erembour had long forgotten Apollon."

Erik lifted his shoulders. "I wasn't searching for it."

"What do the locals consider unusual?" Violet asked. "It's possible pieces of it are washing up, but the locals don't think it any different from whatever the North Sea usually brings ashore."

"Good point." Captain Pemberley rubbed his chin.

"They found us visiting the local inn unusual," Erik said. "If our assailants are in the area, they have been able to avoid notice. Which means they haven't gone into town for supplies or anything else."

"You're certain it went down somewhere around here?" Captain Pemberley asked.

"Based on the information I have, as certain as I can be. But with the depth of the water and its temperature, retrieving anything might have to wait for summer."

"That far out in the North Sea, and you might not be able to get it at all. You'd have to wait for the currents to drag it ashore. If they ever do. Might well and truly be lost," Captain Pemberley said.

"Whoever attacked us doesn't agree with that assessment," Violet said. "They think it's out there and close enough to salvage. It must be, or else they wouldn't be hunting Lord Erik for the information."

"North Sea is a big and dangerous place," Captain Pemberley said. "They might not have realized it went down where the currents are particularly difficult. The depth drops very quickly once you move away from shore."

Violet turned her gaze to her husband, then back to her brother. “Let’s say it’s gone forever. How do we convince those that are hunting us of it?”

Captain Pemberley considered. “I suspect convincing them what happened is going to be less difficult than convincing them to leave you in peace. Now that Lord Erik knows who they are, they will have to silence him permanently.”

“I saw them, too,” Violet whispered.

Captain Pemberley stiffened beside her. “Violet-”

“What did you expect? I was sharing the same room as my husband.”

“I have to end them before they get word back to France,” Erik murmured. “It’s the only way to protect Violet and to keep more from coming after me. These agents weren’t certain I was who they were searching for, and I can’t let them tell anyone else who I am.”

“How many men attacked you?” Captain Pemberley asked.

“Three. One escaped me,” Lord Erik said. “The group I think is behind it usually works in groups of three agents. If they sent more than one team after us, we have at least four people to deal with.”

“Would they have sent more than one group to extract information from the Earl of Marquardt, notorious rake and all-around good-for-nothing?” Captain Pemberley asked.

Violet stiffened, but Erik grinned. “They most likely sent a single team but had a second group as backup. And that would only be because they would need the second group to deal with the Apollon once they learned where it was sunk. Still, we need to be careful.”

“We’re talking about my sister’s life and my childhood friend’s life. Of course we need to be careful,” Captain Pemberley snapped.

Erik held his wife close. “Let’s see if Captain McGregor agrees to speak with us. If he doesn’t, or if he can’t offer any more insights than what we already know, we’ll have to figure out the next step.”

“Do you think he’ll speak with you?” Captain Pemberley asked.

“Duke Erembour said he will.” Erik lifted his shoulders. “And we’ll see soon enough. Once he tells us what he knows, or chooses not to talk to us, we will decide what to do next. No point making any decisions until then.”

Captain Pemberley frowned, but he tucked his chin against his chest in silent agreement.

They all lapsed into silence, and while Violet was grateful for the companionship and levelheadedness of her brother, he confirmed her greatest fear. If they didn’t find a way to end the threat, to silence those who wanted the Apollon, the men that had tried to kill them in the middle of blizzard and had later broken into their room would kill her and Lord Erik.

She shuddered, and Erik held her closer.

Chapter 23

As the carriage approached the hunting lodge, a prickle down Erik's spine warned him.

They were not alone.

He studied the trees and the open fields, but he saw nothing.

Whoever it was had some skill in staying hidden, and they were definitely watching the hunting lodge.

Erik sucked in a breath and glanced over at Captain Pemberley. He reached under the seat and withdrew a pair of pistols. "You still a good shot?"

Captain Pemberley nodded, and Erik handed him the second pistol.

"Stay with Violet. I will see if anyone is inside." Captain Pemberley stared down at the pistol, then turned his gaze to the entrance of the lodge. "I'll go. You stay and protect your wife and my sister."

"My mess," Lord Erik said. "Just keep my wife safe."

With that, he leapt out of the carriage and strode up to the front door. Captain Pemberley would not leave his sister undefended, and while Erik didn't want to face whatever was inside, his friend was even more unprepared for it than he was.

And it was his mess.

Erik would see it put to rights.

Lord Erik Gautin pushed open the front door of the lodge, the pistol in his hand, and both of his daggers tucked into his belt.

His whole body tensed, and his senses stretched as he prepared to strike.

A man seated in an overstuffed leather armchair lifted a glass of Scotch to him. "I wondered how long it would take you to get here."

Erik paused, but he already knew the man opposite him was Captain McGregor. His skin and hair spoke of a man that had spent long days under the harsh rays of the sun and who had been weathered by wind and sea.

But there was more to him than that.

His clipped tone warned he was of the aristocracy, or had been once, though Erik wondered how many would notice it. Few would see past the brigand exterior he presented, as they didn't see past

Erik's image of rake and good-for-nothing. And it was an image. One Lady Violet had seen through.

One he no longer wished to project. But that would wait for later, and it assumed he survived to change it.

Erik dipped his head to Captain McGregor.

"You brought your wife with you. Poor choice."

"Unless I was looking to enlist her brother's aide."

"Captain Pemberley?" The privateer sipped his drink. "I suppose he could prove useful. Still not sure it's worth mixing a lady in with this, but then with Lady Pemberley, you had little choice."

Erik narrowed his eyes. The privateer acted as if he knew Lady Violet, or at least was familiar with her.

"I suppose it's Lady Gautin now, isn't it? Whatever the case, you had better bring them in before they come storming to your rescue. Though, I do wonder who would be wielding the pistol. I hear she's as good of a shot as her brothers."

"You know a lot about us."

"My business to know about people. And you invited me here for knowledge, did you not?"

Erik wasn't certain they had invited him to the lodge at all, but he eased back out of the building and motioned to Captain Pemberley and Lady Violet to join him even as his gaze again skimmed the tree line.

"What's wrong?" Violet asked.

"McGregor is inside. Betting his men are keeping an eye on the place for him."

Captain Pemberley swore under his breath. "He must have been watching me and waiting for you to arrive. I never noticed."

"Wouldn't expect you to have." Erik lifted his shoulders. "Not many enemy soldiers made it aboard English ships without you knowing about it."

"It was a different game than the one you played," Pemberley muttered. "Still, it's interesting that he answered Duke Erembour at all, much less in such a dramatic manner."

"Maybe he likes drama," Lady Violet said. "Might be why he became a privateer."

Erik said no more as he led them both back inside and made the introductions. Lady Violet stared at the man sprawled in the leather armchair, but she said nothing as she took a seat on the opposite end of the room.

Erik drew a deep breath, then turned to the privateer. "You were stationed in this area?"

"Stationed? Not exactly. I came through here as the quarry demanded. But, yes, I was in this area during the timeframe the Raven

was interested in."

The Raven. So Duke Erembour had sent him.

"We are looking for a ship that sunk in this area," Erik said.

Captain McGregor grinned and sipped his Scotch. "I sank a lot of ships, your lordship, you are going to have to be a lot more specific than that."

Erik gave him the details he had, including the type of cruiser it was, the weather conditions from the time period, and the two-week span he suspected the ship had made port.

Captain McGregor studied Lord Erik. "I see how the Raven knew so much. He had an ace, but now the French have found you."

Erik blinked. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Suppose you don't. I've been sailing since I was a boy, and I couldn't have told you all that based on maps, wind currents and whatever else you had. But looking at you, you haven't spent a day on the sea."

Erik frowned. "I get seasick."

McGregor let out a deep laugh, the sound filling the lodge. "But you can chart out a ship's movement like Poseidon was whispering in your ear."

Erik lifted his shoulders. "Once you lay out the variables and the probabilities-"

Captain McGregor held up a hand. "Don't want to know. The sea will repay me tenfold for such hubris. I will tell you what you want to know for all the times you helped me. I sank the Apollon. And with whatever wizardry you employed, you got damn close to where."

"It's here, then?"

"So it is. She beat me and made port before I could sink her, but I caught her coming out of Devil's Cove. We saw her go in, and we were lying in wait for her when she came out."

"Devil's Cove?" Erik asked. "That's not on any map."

"Not its official name, but it's what the locals know it as. Smugglers used it before the war. Probably will use it again, though they were less inclined to during the war." McGregor winked. "Always the risk a privateer might think they were French."

Erik rubbed the back of his neck. "This part of the North Sea gets deep fast once you move away from shore."

"That it does," Captain McGregor said as drained the last of his Scotch. "Who or whatever was on that ship is lost to Poseidon. Leave it that way."

"I would if I could," Erik murmured. "But the French think otherwise."

Captain McGregor stood. "Then we need to teach them they're wrong. Shouldn't be on English soil, anyway."

Captain Pemberley met his gaze. “Did you board the Apollon? You are a privateer.”

McGregor paused a moment too long.

“You did.”

“Yeah, we did. Didn’t take much other than a list of names that Whitehall paid us well for. I remember because I thought it odd anyone was willing to pay that much for names.” His gaze slid over to Lord Erik Gautin. “But I understand why now.”

“My name was on the list,” Erik whispered.

“It might have been. Was written in some kind of code. None of the names looked right, but I didn’t try to figure it out. Didn’t want to know. That was for the Raven.”

“Anyone else on your crew see those names?” Captain Pemberley asked.

“Wouldn’t matter if they had. Not many privateers can read, and none of us are code breakers.”

Captain Pemberley dipped his head in acknowledgement.

Captain McGregor’s gaze slid among the three. “There was a small ship that headed into Devil’s Cove three days ago. Total crew of three, maybe four, men. Thought they were smugglers, but I’m betting they’re here for the same reason you are.”

Captain Pemberley exchanged a glance with Erik.

“Trouble followed you.” Captain McGregor glanced at Lady Violet. “Get her home. I will make certain that boat doesn’t leave Devil’s Cove.”

“Thank you,” Erik said.

“I still owe the French a few black eyes and a reminder that they aren’t welcome in England,” Captain McGregor said.

As the privateer turned to leave, Lady Violet stood and glided over to him.

She faced away from the rest of the group so that her words were all but inaudible to everyone but Captain McGregor.

Erik had been a spy too long and couldn’t help but listen.

“Thank you for helping us. In return, I offer you this. Miss Sinclair is still unwed, by choice rather than because she has lacked offers. She is in London for the Season.”

Captain McGregor’s jaunty smile faded as he stared at Violet. The privateer said nothing more as he left the hunting lodge.

Lord Erik had no idea who Miss Sinclair was, but he would investigate if he survived. Maybe. Some things were better left in the past.

Erik blew out a breath and turned to his wife and her brother. “Apollon is at the bottom of the sea, and we know where. But we won’t be able to get to it, and the French have followed us here.”

“They won’t be able to get it either,” Captain Pemberley said.

“Which means they will never believe us as to what happened to it. Granted, they were going to kill us anyway,” Violet said. “But there is no treasure to find on Apollon. If there were, Captain McGregor would have taken it.”

“There was something on Apollon. He said he only took the list of names, but he didn’t say that’s all that was there,” Erik said. “He was very careful with his words.”

“What do you think he discovered?” Captain Pemberley asked.

“Nothing that I care about,” Erik admitted. “Even if he found the holy grail, he sold it and split the proceeds among him and his crew years ago. But my best guess is there wasn’t any treasure on the ship anymore. The treasure they had brought with them had already been exchanged for the list of names.”

Captain Pemberley clasped his hands behind his back. “The list of names is enlightening. The French were working with someone who was selling out English agents. Question is, who?”

“Not a question I care to answer,” Erik said.

“They were risking your life and a lot of other people’s as well,” Captain Pemberley countered.

“They were, and maybe they do need to be brought to justice. We’ll tell Duke Erembour all we’ve learned. But the war is over.” Erik slid an arm around Violet. “What I want most is to take Violet to Hartmore and enjoy a quiet winter together. I still have a lot to learn about being a good earl, but I will learn.”

Captain Pemberley stared at him. “You really mean that.”

“More than anything.” Erik hugged Violet close. “I didn’t mean for things to happen this way, and I definitely didn’t want her stuck in the middle of this stuff with Ouroboros, but I love Violet. It’s why I asked Lord Dominic for permission to court her when I first came home.”

Violet stared at him.

Captain Pemberley stilled. “You asked Dominic…”

“Doesn’t matter.” Erik brushed his lips over his wife’s temple.

“I’m pushing Dominic into a lake. A deep one. With biting fish. Care to help me?” Violet asked sweetly.

“I’m going to more than push him in a lake,” Captain Pemberley snarled. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him, but I am going to beat it out of him if I have to.”

“I did something, but he wouldn’t tell me what. Stopped even coming to White’s when I was there.” Erik lifted his shoulders. “I asked him a couple of times, but he told me I was imagining things.”

Captain Pemberley shook his head, then he smiled. “If I didn’t know better, I would say being leg-shackled was one of the best things that ever happened to you.”

Erik grinned.

Violet poked a finger into the middle of her brother's chest. "And it would be the best thing that happened to you if you let it."

He held up his hands in his defense. "What is it with ladies and wanting to leg-shackle all of their kin?"

Erik lifted his shoulders. "It's a pretty pleasant state of affairs. Just be certain to find the right lady to be leg-shackled to."

"You don't happen to have any sisters, do you?" Captain Pemberley asked wryly.

"Wish I did," Erik admitted.

"I have a few friends," Violet said too sweetly.

"Back to the task at hand before you both conspire to marry me off," Captain Pemberley said. "We know Captain McGregor sank the ship. We know he turned over the important contents to Whitehall for the reward. And we know there is no way to prove any of it. What do we do now?"

"I'd be happy to leave the French the coordinates of where the Apollon went down, though I doubt that will do me any good." Erik rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not certain, other than we're going to have to face them."

"Assuming they survive Captain McGregor," Violet said.

"Their ship won't. That's for certain. Let's hope they're all on it when he sinks it," Captain Pemberley said. "Whatever the case, we aren't doing anything more today. You've both been traveling for days, and we need to take a moment to figure things out. There are a couple of men I served with that I trust who don't live far from here. I will see if they can come lend us a hand in whatever we decide."

"That would be welcome." Erik clapped his childhood friend on the shoulder. "And thank you, for everything."

"Don't thank me yet." Captain Pemberley shook his head, then showed Erik and Violet to one of the guestrooms.

It was large, and while the furnishings were rustic, the feather mattress and thick carpets spoke of luxury. Erik figured it was used less for hunting and more for romantic excursions. He had partaken in enough of those to recognize the difference.

And he was glad he was done with them.

Now, he had Violet, and he would get to fall asleep beside her and wake up with her in his arms.

Erik could think of nothing better, and with the amount of experience he already had, he had a very good idea of what was possible.

He had to figure out how to deal with the men after him so he could start building that life with her.

And he would. For Violet. And for himself.

Chapter 24

Violet sat down on the edge of the bed and stared up at her husband. Nothing had gone as she had planned since her debut. She hadn't found the right gentleman from the right family. And she had fallen in love with one of the most notorious rakes in the ton.

A rake that circumstances had forced her to marry. A rake that she would marry all over again even if the circumstances were different.

A rake that loved her as she loved him. He had even admitted it to her brother. Violet hugged herself. She couldn't lose him. Not now that she had all she had ever wanted.

Erik sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her.

Violet lay her head against his shoulder. "I'm scared. I don't want to lose you."

"I'm sorry I brought all of this to our marriage. And I wish you would have stayed with Lady Aurora in Riverwood. Then I'd know you were safe."

"But my brother might not have come if I hadn't been with you. He secured the lodge for us and has friends in the area who will help."

"There is all of that. Still, I would rather have faced this alone than risk you. But I knew better than to argue with you. You wouldn't have stayed back no matter what I said."

"You're right about that. I was not letting you face this alone. You're my husband. I am supposed to stand beside you no matter what comes. And I hope whoever is betraying men like you, men that served king and country, gets stung by a thousand bees."

A smile tugged on Erik's lips.

Violet folded her arms over her chest. "It was the most ladylike horrible fate I could come up with. I will save you some of the things I read in Robert and Dominic's history books when they weren't watching me."

Erik hugged her close. "I love you, Violet."

She squeezed her eyes closed as she tried to swallow the wave of emotion that threatened to drown her. She had wanted those words for so long, had wanted him to mean them, and now she had them. "I love you, too. I have loved you for so long."

He held her close, rubbing her back as he gave her a moment to absorb the enormity of the feelings assaulting her.

Eric kissed her temple. “I’ve loved you since the day you climbed a tree and were lying in wait for Dominic, Robert, and me to pass beneath. You dropped down on us and begged us to let you ride with us. Dominic said he was worried you would throw eggs or worse at us if he said no, so he let you come along.”

“I had forgotten all about that,” Violet murmured. “Dominic had told me I couldn’t go riding with you because I was too little and wouldn’t be able to keep up. I wanted to prove to him I could do anything he could do, so I climbed that tree and waited. I figured if I showed him how capable I was, he would let me go riding with you.”

“I insisted he bring you with us so we would be certain you didn’t get hurt and get me in trouble with Michael. Really, I just wanted him to bring you with us. I liked having you along. You never talked about boring stuff like other girls did, and you saw me for me even then. You were one of the few people that never wanted me to be Michael.”

“I never liked Michael, but I liked you. A lot.” Violet hugged him tighter. “Do you really love me?”

He held her close. “I love you, Violet. And while I wish things could have been different, I’m glad you’re my wife. If I’d known you had a crush on me, I would have tried to convince you steal away with me to Gretna Green.”

She held him tighter. Everything she had ever wanted, and he was giving it all to her. She may have been a fool for falling in love with him, but she was a deliriously happy fool. Beyond happy.

Erik closed his eyes and laid his cheek against her temple. “I love you, Violet. And I really do want to make a life together. Filled with children, family, and friends. And I want…”

“What do you want?” She smiled up at him as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“I want to be there. To celebrate the holidays. To know what gifts to buy rather than sending a member of the staff out to get something. I want our children to grow up like your brothers did. As friends and companions rather than the heir and spare. Mostly, I want to be the earl every matron snickers about behind her gloved hand because I became a reformed rake. Because I am a responsible man that takes care of his family rather than the charming good-for-nothing they all thought I was going to be.”

Violet kissed him, a gentle kiss filled with all her love and need for him. “I love you, Erik. Because you let me ride with you, because you danced with me even though I was your friends’ annoying little sister, and because you are the kind of man I can always rely on. Because you will protect me, love me, but you will also let me be me. Because

you're the kind of man that will always prioritize family and friends. And because I never stopped having a crush on you."

Erik grinned, a genuine expression that lit his entire face.

He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

Violet melted against him. No, things had gone as she had planned, but she was happier than she ever thought she would be. And she loved her husband.

As he loved her.

She smiled against him. "I love you, Lord Erik Gautin, Earl of Marquardt, devoted husband and soon-to-be doting father."

"Soon-to-be?" he asked.

She laughed and held him close. "With all we've been up to, I can't imagine it will take long."

"As long as I have you, the rest will work itself out. I love you, Violet." His grin widened. "And I love finally being able to say it."

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

He held her close and threaded his fingers through her hair. He teased his lips over hers when a commotion outside pulled him away from her.

Violet frowned. "What's going on?"

Erik slipped from her and over to the window. He peered out without disturbing the curtains.

And balled his hands into fists as he grabbed his pistol and headed toward the door.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"A few of Captain McGregor's men stayed behind, and they're warning us," Erik said. "Our assailants must have learned we're here, and they aren't giving us the chance to escape."

"They followed us here?" Violet whispered. "That strange man at the inn…"

"Maybe, but I don't think they were expecting pirates waiting in the bushes."

"They stayed to keep an eye on us," Lady Violet said. "Captain McGregor must have suspected something."

"From the looks of it, the French brought hired thugs from London. The men they hired must not know the French will kill them once they have what they want." Erik tightened his hold on his pistol. "Whatever you said to Captain McGregor, I thank you. Seems like it convinced him to help."

Violet smiled. Her husband and brother may not recognize who Captain McGregor was, but she did. And she had given him the piece of information he most wanted.

What he did with it was up to him, however, and Miss Sinclair was no mild-mannered miss. Though all the better. For both of them.

Violet hoped it worked out in his favor, not least because he had stayed to help them now.

A gunshot split the air followed by a second.

Erik grabbed her hand and tugged her over to the large armoire. He handed her his pistol and kissed her cheek.

“Never forget that I love you.”

Chapter 25

Erik had found love. Despite the situation, a grin split his lips. Violet loved him, and he would not lose that. Not to anyone, but particularly not to the French that he had fought against for so many years.

All he wanted was a quiet existence with his wife. A chance to be a good earl. And maybe a few children if they were so blessed.

Or a house full of them.

Erik slipped his daggers from his boots. They would do him little good against a pistol, but most pistols had a single shot. He whispered a prayer, then opened the door to his room.

The scent of blood assaulted him.

And a man armed with a pistol leveled the gun at him.

The same man that had been in Erik's room at the inn all those nights ago.

"Lord Gautin," he sneered, not even attempting to hide his accent. "You have brought us close. Now you will bring us the rest of the way."

"I know where Apollon went down. Give me a map, and I will show you."

The man paused.

"I don't want anything on the Apollon," Erik said. "Whatever is there is yours. The jewels, gold, whatever else. All yours. You salvage it, and you will be set for life."

The man narrowed his eyes. "It sunk?"

"You already knew that, or it would have made it home."

"And what happened to the Apollon?"

"It ran afoul of the English navy," Erik lied, but he was good at lying. And he had no intention of causing Captain McGregor more difficulties. "The captain of Apollon must not have realized that Devil's Cove was frequented by smugglers. The navy was waiting outside of the cove and sank him."

The man paused. "The cargo…"

"Everything is at the bottom of the North Sea."

"They did not take survivors?"

“It’s the navy. It’s doubtful they even boarded the ship,” Erik said. “Apollon wasn’t flying colors. They were either smugglers coming out of their hideaway, or a French ship up to something worse. Neither is the type of vessel the English navy is known for granting quarter.”

The man cursed loudly in French and muttered something about it all being for nothing.

Though what “it” was, Erik didn’t know. They had to have known the ship had sunk and lost all hands. Had to have known the cargo either went down with it or had long since been sold by whomever had intercepted the ship.

Unless…

Erik stared at the Frenchman. “What was on that ship?”

“The greatest treasure of all, and now it is lost. Damn you English!” He pointed his pistol at Erik.

A crash and cursing in English below warned that Captain Pemberley and the extra footmen Erik had brought along were putting up a fight. It was possible some of Captain McGregor’s men were in the fray as well.

If that were the case, the French spies stood little chance, even with the extra muscle they had brought from London. But Erik had to survive long enough for it to matter.

“You have caused me no end of trouble, English,” the man said as he cocked his pistol.

Erik clutched his daggers, but they were of little consequence.

And he had given his pistols to Captain Pemberley and Violet. His best friend and the woman he loved.

As a single shot rang out downstairs, he prayed the pistol he’d given Captain Pemberley had found its mark.

The Frenchman’s face tightened, then his eyes widened in surprise.

“Walk away,” Violet said from behind Erik. “You have one shot in that pistol, just as I do. If you kill my husband, I will kill you and you can never tell your superiors that the Apollon and everyone on it is gone. You have one chance. Take it and walk away.”

Her voice didn’t quaver.

It was the same little girl that had followed him and her brothers on horseback.

And now she had followed him into the middle of this mess.

Erik had wanted her to stay safe, to stay hidden, but he should have known better.

That wasn’t her, and it never would be.

It was part of why he loved her so much.

“Silly girl. You-”

Before the man could finish his sentence, a gunshot deafened them all.

Blood splattered the hallway as Violet's shot found its mark and blood welled up across the man's chest. His mouth gaped open as he fell to his knees.

Erik sprinted forward and grabbed the man's pistol. He then slit the Ouroboros agent's throat with his dagger.

Racing to the steps, Erik found Captain Pemberley covered in blood, though it belonged to someone other than him.

He stared up at Eric, panting. "The men you brought with you are something else. Never seen people fight like that."

Erik dipped his head. He would thank Duke Erembour later. For the moment, he turned back to his wife.

Violet stood in the middle of the doorway staring at the dead Frenchman.

Without saying a word, Erik scooped her into his arms, carried her downstairs, and out to the coach.

When her tears came, he simply held her as they waited for the constable.

Chapter 26

Erik and Captain Pemberley were very careful with what they told the constable, allowing him to think they had again been the targets of a botched robbery.

While some thought it off for Lord Erik Gautin to have been targeted twice within such a short time of being married, most assumed it was because he had made enemies of the wrong jealous husband.

And Erik allowed them to think that.

There was no point bringing up the war again. No point rehashing all that had been. And the fewer people that knew what he had done during the war, the better.

And the safer for Violet.

Erik had sent word to Duke Erembour of all that had happened. Perhaps in time they would figure out who had been selling out the English agents. But for the moment, Erik's main concern was his wife.

While Violet had been subdued for days after the incident, she was starting to come back to being herself. He knew it would take time. Knew how hard that first kill was even if it was deserved. Even if it was to save your own life.

And Erik was there for her through everything.

Not only was she beautiful, but she was courageous. And she loved him. Erik wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve her, but he would do everything in his power to keep deserving her.

And to keep making her happy.

Once he was certain Violet was going to be okay, Erik packed up to take her home.

Back to Hartmore.

That he and Violet were going to make a home.

Captain Pemberley oversaw the footmen load Erik and Violet's carriage, then he came to join them.

"The constable stopped by early this morning to say they had found the wreckage of a ship in Devil's Cove. He wondered if that's how the thieves had followed you, though he thought it odd that thieves would be so relentless."

“Might be that jealous husband,” Erik mused. “Though it’s good to know Captain McGregor is thorough.”

“We both know it’s not a jealous husband.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Erik said. “Let them think what they want. Soon enough they will all be sniggering about how Lady Violet has tamed the worst rake in the ton, and they will call me leg-shackled and all sorts of other things.”

“They will,” Captain Pemberley agreed.

“And I won’t care. I will be too busy enjoying my wife. And maybe a family, if I’m lucky. I will leave them to their gossip.”

Captain Pemberley clapped him on the shoulder. “You are a wise man, Lord Erik Gautin. But then, you’ve always valued happiness above all else. Even when it meant dealing with Lord Michael.”

Erik grinned. “I did and do. At least in some areas.” He glanced over at Violet. “Some things, I would die to protect.”

“Will I see you in London this Season?” Captain Pemberley asked.

“That’s up to Lady Violet, though I suspect it will also come down to whether Lady Aurora and Duke Erembour decide to have their baby in London or out at Riverwood. Violet would like to be with her friend whatever they decide, and I support her decision. Friends are there for friends.”

“That they are,” Captain Pemberley said. “Something my family almost forgot.”

“No, they didn’t forget,” Erik said. “But please take care of Lord Dominic for us. He needs it.”

Captain Pemberley nodded his agreement. He shook hands with Erik one final time and hugged his sister.

Erik then helped Violet into the coach and they headed for Hartmore.

For home.

Epilogue

Violet stood beside Lord Erik Gautin and stared up at the beautiful manor house of Hartmore and the sprawling snow-covered lawns.

Even now, every window sparkled, and the scent of beeswax hung in the air as the staff lined up to greet their lord and the new lady of the house.

She was still shaken from everything that had happened. And she still had nightmares about pulling the trigger and killing a man.

But Violet would do it again to protect her husband. To protect the man she loved, and that loved her.

Erik hugged her, then he opened the carriage door and stepped out. Reaching back, he scooped Lady Violet into his arms and spun her around.

"Welcome home, my love," he said as he carried her across the threshold.

Violet laughed and hugged him as she stared at her new home.

Yes, it was a bit dark now. Lacking the color and joy of love and family. But they would change that.

Together.

She had never been more certain of anything.

"I love you, Lord Erik Gautin." She grinned up at him. "And you have made me the happiest woman in all of England. Maybe in the whole world."

"Big expectations for this good- for the current Earl of Marquardt. But I am going to try."

"You've already succeeded," Violet said.

And she would show him each and every day.

No, things had not gone as planned since her debut.

They were much better, and she would do whatever she had to do to keep them that way. She loved her husband as he loved her. And nothing was going to steal that from them.

Together, they would make certain of it.

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I hope you enjoyed reading Rescued by the Duke as much as I enjoyed writing it!

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Also by Elizabeth Brighton

Free Book

The Duke's Homecoming Wish

Dukes, spies, and lies

Rescued by the Duke

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